

**PRACTICAL HINTS ON
PLAYWRITING**

PRACTICAL HINTS ON PLAYWRITING

BY
AGNES PLATT



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FOREWORD

It is easy to say "Do this" and "Don't do that." Indeed, I could have reiterated both at such length that I might have written a book quite as long as this on any one of the points that I have tried to take up here chapter by chapter.

I do most fervently believe that the dry bones of stage technique can be taught—in fact, all my personal experience goes to prove this. I have been handling plays now for more years than I care to remember, and have found in case after case that a little technical adjustment will turn an unmarketable play into a commercial proposition.

Yet when all is said and done, I am no believer in hard and fast rules. The one point always to bear in mind is that any rule, however necessary, can be modified to suit each individual case. Above all, times change. What is desired one year will be met with indifference the next. The great precept which no dramatist can afford to overlook is, that he must study the needs of his time.

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**PRACTICAL HINTS ON
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CHAPTER I

WHAT THE PUBLIC WANT; WHAT THE MANAGERS
WANT; WHAT THE PRACTICAL ACTOR WANTS

“I know what I like!” We are all familiar with this phrase, which is one that is constantly on the lips of the theatre-going public, and one of which it is well that every would-be dramatist should take heed.

The public *does* know what it likes; and it will not be coerced into thinking otherwise. I have often heard the conscientious objector admit that a play which he has been told to admire is good, but—he does not go a second time to see it! The reason why he likes a certain play he may find hard to tell, but he is generally quite clear about his likes and dislikes.

Since it is evident that the whole financial side of the theatre depends upon the knack of pleasing the public, a playwright who wishes to be successful must study the art of pleasing.

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To do this he must study the psychology of crowds, and he must visit the theatre again and again to watch, not the play only, but its effect upon the audience. He will soon realise that audiences differ. A line that provokes a roar of laughter one night will fall comparatively flat the next; but with a little care he will be able to look out for certain qualities which always tell, and if he reasons from what he observes, will learn in time to differentiate between the successful effects which are due to the writing of the play, and those which are due entirely to the acting or production. He will see that some lines, which are really very witty in themselves, miss their effect upon the stage because they give but little chance to the actor. They may appeal to the mind but they do not appeal to the eye; whereas many another line, which is in itself infinitely less witty, will go with telling effect when spoken on the stage, because it gives the speaker a chance for facial play or gesture.

What the public wants when it goes to see a play is primarily the appeal to the eye. The stage speaks to the brain through the eye, and what we see is of paramount importance. A very slight study of audiences will make this perfectly apparent, but we shall soon begin to

notice that effects divide themselves broadly into two types—the sort of thing which we have always liked and always shall like, because it is based elementally upon human nature; and the type of effect which appeals by reason of its novelty. The successful play is really a combination of these two qualities. It must have its roots in our common human nature, but it must be set forth in an original way.

Fashions change: there are fashions in playwriting as in everything else. The mode of yesterday is never the mode of to-day. It is only by studying audiences, and watching with care and intelligence their way of taking all the points in plays both new and old, that we learn to gauge the feeling of the moment. Unless we keep our finger on the public pulse we can never succeed, and all books upon playwriting are apt to fail if they lay down hard and fast rules and make no allowances for time and change. Everything I say in this book I say with diffidence. My desire is not to lay down the law but to awaken thought; to make some faint suggestions which will give birth to a train of reflection individual to the thinker, and so enable him to develop on his own lines. No hard and fast rules can be anything but hampering; however well versed one may be in the theory of

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playwriting, constant visits to the theatre will keep one in mind of the fact that the ultimate judge is always the public, and that unless we study the public it is useless to study the art.

Go to the same play half a dozen times. The first time you will go to see the play, and you will learn much, but your later visits will teach you more, as you will then go to see the effect of the play on the audience. Watch closely, and when you hear the house rock with laughter or ringing with applause, say to yourself—"Why?" Sometimes the question will be easy to answer; catchy sentiment or a really funny line may explain it. At other times, although you will find yourself laughing or applauding heartily with the audience, you will not be quite so sure to what your emotion is due. In the end you will probably decide that it is due to an ensemble. The line is, in itself, crisp and good; it has lent itself to a telling delivery aided by facial expression, or possibly some significant bit of business; and further reflection yet will show you that the producer of the play has put the actor who has to speak that line in the most effective position for its delivery.

Ensemble! I am afraid I shall use this word again and again, for it is a vital one where the

stage is concerned. It leads us at once to the second heading of our chapter, "What the Manager Wants." A successful stage production is always a question of ensemble. However good the play, it will miss its effect on the stage unless it lends itself to acting. The highest type of play is at its best when seen upon the stage. One of the wonders of the stage, to my mind, is the number of arts that are called upon to contribute to its productions. The work of the producer alone is an art in itself, and one far too little appreciated by the unknowing public. The choice of the cast is an art: it is usually easy enough to think of the right actors for certain parts, though not so easy to find those actors disengaged when one wants them; but to blend a cast requires balance and proportion—sometimes of the finest order. I have seen the whole effect of a play marred by the fact that the cast was not homogeneous. For instance, I remember one play in which James Welch appeared with James Fernandez—both fine actors in their own way—but Welch in those days had a microscopic delicacy of style, while Fernandez was essentially broad and dramatic. The result was that Welch seemed finickin and Fernandez crude, because they were such bad foils for each other.

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I merely mention this as an instance of the difficulties of casting, because I want to lay stress on the fact that a manager's choice of a play is swayed by so many practical considerations which the inexperienced dramatist is apt to ignore.

A manager may sincerely admire a play, and yet be afraid to risk its production because he cannot lay his hand on the right person for the principal part. When choosing a play, he is not merely concerned with the play but with the whole production, and he has a thousand details to consider and bear in mind in estimating the probabilities of success. What the manager wants is a play that will be effective when produced, and that will not be too troublesome to produce. In short, he wants at least a "sporting chance." Some plays bristle with difficulties. It is not exactly that they are impracticable, but there are too many "ifs" to be reckoned with: "if" rightly cast; "if" produced at the right theatre; "if" advertised in the right way, the play may be a success.

We of the profession have a pet phrase of our own which we use of plays; we say that certain plays are "actor-proof." Speaking generally, this means that an error in the casting will not militate seriously against their success.

To this I may add the phrase "audience-proof," by which I mean that certain plays will tell with almost any audience, whereas others, which are not audience-proof, demand a special public.

Of course, all managers prefer a play that is actor-proof and audience-proof, and proof in every possible way. That goes without saying. Such plays make a tremendous fortune, and the profits from them go on for a long period of years. But if a manager cannot get perfection he will take instead a play that happens to suit his own requirements; in other words, a play, the central parts of which can be filled by his own leading actors; a play which suits his own theatre and his own clientele. The essential thing, however, is that it shall be a play to which he feels he can give a suitable production. The play is for him merely a means to a production, and he sees the result in the terms of the whole production, and not merely from the literary point of view alone. In fact, so far do we carry this feeling, that if we want to condemn a play we say of it that it is "too literary," in tones of scathing contempt. It does not follow that we want a badly written play, but it does follow that we want a play, which will speak well. The dialogue must trip naturally from

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the actors' tongues. No amount of beautiful writing will compensate for the frigid effect of set speeches from the lips of an actor unused to speaking them, on the ears of an audience which has come out, not for a lesson in rhetoric, but to see the mirror held up to nature.

"Fine writing!" How often have I heard a producer belabour a poor dramatist with that expression, "We do not want fine writing!" A manager does *not* want "fine writing": what he wants is a "heart-to-heart" play; a bit of human nature which will go home when played by human beings, subject, of course, to the justifiable exaggeration of humour and to the adjustment needed to fit the theme to the conditions of the stage. He wants something that will arrest attention, and this in itself is not easy to get. Many plays are written but few are chosen, not because the level of playwriting is low—on the contrary, I know by experience that it is surprisingly high—but because plays have such a tendency to resemble one another. We get play after play on the same subject: play after play which, in spite of intelligent writing and neat character drawing, lacks *grip*. It is interesting enough to read, but there is nothing in it to stage. The characters are true to nature but they belong too much to the com-

monplace average. The dialogue is easy, but it does not differentiate. Any speech might be spoken by any character. In short, the whole effect of the play is tame, and one feels that on the stage it would be tedious. This is not the type of play the manager wants. He wants something that lends itself to effective production, even though the effect be that of ordinary human conditions—the sort of conditions to which the word “effect” would be the last one to apply. To present such conditions naturally on the stage is extremely hard and requires an immense amount of ingenuity: unless such a theme is ingeniously handled it has no stage value. Ingenuity is the keynote to many a stage success.

If what the manager wants is an effective stage production, what the practical actor wants is—what he in his own stage parlance calls—a “fat part.” He is also out for effect. I have known many a dramatist try to convince an actor that he has written a telling rôle. The actor will listen with an expression of bewilderment, and at the end of the author’s persuasive eloquence will simply exclaim, “But there is nothing to be done with it.” It is by no means the longest part which is the most effective. The “fat” part is the part which gives plenty

of scope for the actor's art; the part in which he can make his lines tell by the aid of varied inflection, business and facial expression. I have often known an audience make an extraordinary mistake about the length of a part: they will not realise that the actor has not come on to the stage until the act is three parts through, because their attention has been directed to the part from the very beginning of the play. They have been told about the character by the other people in the play, and their expectation has been excited before the actor's entrance to such an extent that an illusory effect has been produced in their minds. It is in points like these that the dramatist's skill is apparent: no mere verbosity can take the place of stage technique. What the practical actor must have is a part that lends itself to playing. The conditions of the stage must be considered and used to the best advantage: the lines must be so written that their points can be driven home with apparent ease. The character drawing must be of the type that will "get over the footlights," in other words, it must stand out from the ordinary rut, having traits sufficiently marked to enable the actor to present a living character sketch without any necessity for forcing the note.

Outsiders often exclaim at the exaggeration of the stage: if they only knew, this exaggeration is often due to an ill or well-judged effort on the part of the producer to make bricks without straw. I have frequently heard James Welch say to his company, "We must put every ounce into this, my boys, it is such rotten stuff." On the other hand, he would stop a zealous actor. "Don't try to *make* that line," he'd say, "it speaks itself." One of the first eye-openers a young dramatist encounters when he sees his work in the hands of a producer is the fact that *good* work plays itself, but *bad* work requires from the whole company an infinity of care.

CHAPTER II

THINGS THAT ARE ESSENTIAL IN A GOOD PLAY, AND
THOSE THAT A SUCCESSFUL PLAYWRIGHT MUST
AVOID

I want to be Irish and put the cart before the horse! It will be clearer, I think, if I speak of the things to avoid before trying to indicate essentials (a much more difficult matter). First of all, it is obvious that a dramatist must avoid creating a bad impression on the manager. It is very hard indeed for an inexperienced author to realise that a manager is an extremely busy man who has not a second of his time to waste, and who is certainly not running a philanthropic institution. When offering him a play, one must endeavour to impress him with the fact that that play is a commercial proposition; that it is not written by a greenhorn, and that if he loses money over its production the fault will be his and not the author's.

Now managers have no time to read themselves all the plays that are sent in to them. Plays come in shoals, in hurricanes, in whirl-

winds! I, myself, have read over a thousand a year. Plays, when they reach a managerial office, are read by someone whose business it is to weed out the impossible and write reports upon those which are deemed sufficiently promising for the manager's own eye. These reports take the form of a short synopsis of the plot and a brief criticism. The essence of both synopsis and report is brevity. One has to summarise in a few lines, and if there is nothing in the play of a nature sufficiently striking for the reader's report at once to arrest the manager's attention, the play will stand no chance of being read by the manager at all. It used to be an old axiom among dramatic critics and all experienced on the stage, that if one could not summarise the central situation in three lines the play would prove of insufficient backbone to arrest public attention. In other words, a play must be built round a striking situation—something which leaps to the eye. We often say that a play which is to fill a two-hour bill may be comparatively dull throughout its progress, provided it contains one pregnant quarter of an hour. In other words, a scene will make a play. The thing to be avoided above all others by the would-be dramatist is a theme that never builds up to a big moment.

I think I had better take this opportunity of explaining that when I speak of a big moment, or of an effect, or of a situation, I am not necessarily referring to drama. We use these phrases of all types of plays; even the lightest frivol will have its big moment when the laughter effervesces to its height; even the simplest domestic drama will have its effect when some human line in it goes home. In short, the big moment in a play is the moment when that play reaches its climax, no matter what type of climax it may be. No play is of any use unless it works up to a climax, though that climax may be just the height of fun. *It must build-up.* The essential feature of all playwriting is the knack of *building-up*.

It is obvious that a dramatist should avoid writing a play which has no story for the reader to summarise in his report. There must be some one thing which the reader can lay hold of and set before the manager to attract his attention to that play: the colourless play stands no chance whatever on the stage. But for a play to receive due attention from a reader, it is necessary that certain ~~less~~ important matters shall ~~also~~ be just right. Even such an apparently superficial matter as the look of the manuscript, the binding and type, demand con-

sideration. One must always remember that a reader receives far too many plays, and that the dramatist who is worth while suffers for the sins of the Eternal Bore. We cannot stir without being waylaid by the man who assures us that he has written the greatest play that ever was: he buttonholes us, and pours into our reluctant ears denunciations of all actors, managers, and readers—ourselves included—and tries to ram that unfortunate play down our throats. So much of our time gets wasted in this way that either our legitimate work or our own health and well-being have to suffer. But one thing is almost certain, and that is that the play by the Eternal Bore will not be professionally typed. It is usually written in his own elegant hand, and he uses this as a reason for wasting yet more of our time while he reads the *chef d'œuvre* aloud to us. Oh! the joy of seeing a professionally typed manuscript. Oh! the relief to our poor, tired eyes to have the uniform focus of the standard machine. We start those manuscripts with gratitude in our hearts towards the writer, and the victory is half won!

But there are certain faults in construction which, in spite of a professionally typed manuscript, are apt to prejudice the reader and leave

him with no doubt as to the writer's inexperience. The worst and most obvious of these faults is the use of soliloquy, especially when that soliloquy opens the play. A manager, glancing at the first page of a play which opens with a soliloquy, will say: "Inexperienced; he has never had anything on," and will, in some cases, throw that play down unread. I know a certain number of people plead for the soliloquy: they say it is no more unnatural than many other stage conventions. Possibly not, but it is worse than unnatural in the manager's eyes; *it is out of date*. 'Nuff said!

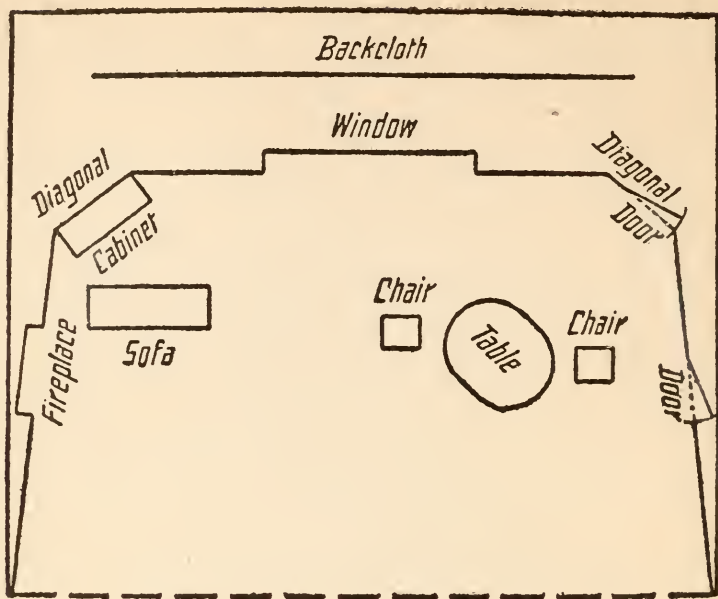
The wording of stage directions is another matter in which the amateur gives himself away. He commits one of two faults. Either he bristles with R., L., C., UP, and so on, with very little idea of what use he is making of these magic emblems, or else he omits all stage directions and runs his dialogue along unbroken, committing the mistake of supposing that because he knows what he wants to convey he has necessarily conveyed it.

An author cannot write a good play unless he has a clear conception of the scenes in which he wishes the action to take place. If it is a room scene, he must see the room and the probable articles of furniture clearly before his eyes,

and must know where the door stands in relation to the fire-place or window. Unless he is clear about these things he cannot expect to raise a mental picture in the mind of the reader.

But it is better for him not to be too arbitrary in the matter of other stage directions, as, for a time at least, he will find it wiser to leave such details to the producer. Of course, the main business—action which literally affects the story—must be given, and it is pleasanter for the reader, and customary nowadays, for such stage directions to be written flowingly, as one might write them in a novel, keeping them, however, as succinct as possible. It is also essential that, even for the setting down of business as structural as this, the author should be acquainted with our stage convention, and should not say R. when he means L., or UP when he means DOWN. He should always, when his play is done, make a little sketch of his scenes; the sort of bare outline which we call technically a “scene plot,” and on this scene plot he should indicate how the doors are to open, whether on or off the stage, and which side the hinges should be.

I give here a little scene plot as an illustration:



The dotted lines represent the footlights, and we speak of playing DOWN towards the footlights or UP towards the back of the stage where the backcloth is.

In the scene that I have drawn here there will be backing outside the window; a country scene, or something which represents a view, through the window. There will also be backing for each of the doors, and it is because it is important that this backing should be in the right place, that you have to indicate how the door is going to hinge and open. In this country we take our R. and L. from the point of

view of the actor on the stage, exactly opposite to the R. and L. of the audience which is the custom abroad. We often in England hear the L. side described as the P. (Prompt) side, and the R. as the O.P. (Opposite Prompt). These words, of course, have arisen from the old custom of having the prompter stand in the L. wing. The principal items of furniture should be indicated in a scene plot, but not the unimportant accessories, as the producer will fill these in to dress the stage according to his own idea. But it is always necessary to indicate the character of a room scene, the social status of the owner, and the temperament and taste that would have guided its decorations; as it is extremely important that when the curtain rises the audience should at once perceive the suggestion which the author wishes to convey. #

Another important thing for a dramatist to remember is to beware of creating an impression on a manager's mind that his play is going to be exceedingly expensive to produce. I have known authors cut their own throats from sheer ignorance of the managerial temperament. They have taken great pains to set down every line-part and walk-on in the character list until its numbers have soared up into infinity. The poor, scared manager would never look beyond

that character list; he would be reduced by its proportions to a state of prostration which would make the mental effort of reading the play impossible to him. *Keep your Character List down.* When you have thought out your plot and decided that it cannot be done under eleven characters, think it over again and reduce that eleven to nine, and after that put in three weeks more with a wet towel round your head and bring it down to eight, and then make up your mind that it has got to be done with seven! Cut every expensive detail ruthlessly unless it is absolutely essential to the well-being of the play. If it is possible to work a double, indicate that double in the character list, for though we do not double parts in London, to be able to do so is of great assistance on the provincial tours, as it saves not only a salary but also a railway fare.

Provided that a play is properly typed; that the character list is not hopelessly long; that it is not obviously written by a man who knows nothing about the stage—it is certain to get due consideration from the reader. Its chances of acceptance, of course, must depend on other qualities.

A student at one of my lectures once tried to put me in a tight corner. He said to me, “Now,

Miss Platt, can you tell us in one word the essential quality of a play?" I replied, "Yes, I can—Loveableness." And that is the essential quality of a play. Talent, wit, skill, ingenuity, novelty, drama, are all great gifts, but they are useless without the greatest of all—*Charm*. If you can speak to the imagination of your audience and make them dream, you have won. No matter how crude a play may be; no matter how improbable; no matter how often the theme may have been treated before; if we fall in love with the central figure we will go to see that play again and again. Personality is the greatest quality in this world; and where the stage is concerned personality wins every time.

In the old days, the days of the actor-manager, there were many grumbles and groushings because the personality of the actor-manager was supposed to act as a sort of tyranny to the dramatist. We have learnt by sad experience that any personality is better than none at all, and that the actor-manager is, at least, a man. We are now up against that inhuman creature the Syndicate: we have changed King Log for King Stork. Nothing appeals to the modern theatrical syndicate but £ s. d. Now the one thing that can command money in this world is *Charm*.

There is no charm in aggressiveness. If you have a message to give to the world do not gnash it out between your teeth: try to get into the brains of those to whom you wish to speak your message, and divine the form of appeal which will go home to them. I read so many plays written with a good purpose. The authors come clamouring to me and say, "Oh! but I wrote it for such and such a reason; it ought to go on." Such plays have been written for the purpose of doing good, but they have not been written for the purpose of pleasing others. It is possible to combine both purposes, and the dramatist who succeeds in accomplishing this will rank among the benefactors of the human race.

We do not want to be hopelessly depressed. The gloomy play, dear to the heart of many societies, is not the unique work of art its worshippers are apt to imagine. Ask any professional reader: he will tell you what I tell you, that there are numberless well-written tragedies passing continually into his hands, but a good comedy is a *rara avis*. It is quite easy to write tragedy. It is quite easy to let yourself go and revel in horrors—it is only a form of hysteria after all. But to look on the bright side of things; to write with a feeling heart for the

sorrows of this world and with an understanding mind of the pluck that lies behind the smiling lips is an infinitely greater gift. To see through petty faults to the great qualities that lie behind, waiting for the call; to know that in every human being, however small, however sordid, there lies the heart of all humanity; and then to touch that heart and make it leap to life—that is the work of the artist. And of all hearts the heart of the stage, which is a blend of many hearts, should be the one whose mission it is to speak to the many in the *cri du cœur*—the voice that appeals to all.

The call of the stage is universal; and it is those plays which have in them the elements of our common nature which are sure of their success.

CHAPTER III

HOW TO CHOOSE A PLOT; HOW TO DECIDE UPON ITS TREATMENT; HOW TO BUILD UP A SCENARIO

We have a habit of differentiating between theme and plot when speaking of plays, and a certain confusion sometimes arises through an inability to distinguish between the two words. The theme is the idea that underlies the play: the plot the actual sequence of events. As an instance, let us take Sheridan's "School for Scandal." The theme of that play is the deteriorating effect of society scandal and scandalmongers upon the mind of an innocent country girl. The plot deals with the machinations of the hypocritical Joseph Surface to get Lady Teazle into his net and her escape therefrom, with all the incidents that go to the making of the play.

We hold the theory that plot should develop from character, in other words, that the incidents in a play should spring naturally from the relations of the various characters to one another. When a dramatist shuts his eyes to character drawing and tries to build up a series

of dramatic incidents merely for the sake of their sensation, he is not holding up the mirror to nature but is spinning an arbitrary structure of his own creation. This might appeal to a certain extent for its mechanical ingenuity but could never call upon the deeper appreciation of a reasonable mind. The whole art of stage writing, as of stage acting, is contained in Shakespeare's phrase, "The touch of Nature," and no incident, however thrilling, will really excite imagination unless we feel that the people whom it affects are fellow human beings. We stage people have a habit of saying, when we discuss plays, that the characters are people who are, or are not, the kind of people whom the audience will care to meet; in other words, we recognise to the full the fact, that unless an audience feels that it has a personal knowledge of the characters upon the stage and hails them as friends or enemies, that audience will not take a real interest in their fate. In short, the humanity of the characters is all essential, and no play will make a success unless its characters are human beings.

This granted, it follows that the plot of the play must be guided by the characters, and the events of the play must spring from the types of characters and their position in relation to

one another. There must be a reason for all things. An audience may not be sufficiently clear in its technical judgment to know exactly what is wrong with a play; but if reason is not duly considered in its treatment, the audience will have an unfailing instinct that *something* is wrong, and very badly wrong.

However unusual the situation round which a play turns, it must always be probable, and the details in connection with it must be so adjusted as to make this probability unquestionable. We know by our own experience of life that extraordinary things are continually happening. The long arm of coincidence is by no means a stage fiction, it is an actual fact. Therefore there is no reason why the principal incidents of a play should not be both dramatic and striking, but their details must be adjusted with an eye to probability, and, above all, they must be in keeping with the tendencies of the characters. The action of a play should spring from the character drawing, and seem to us its reasonable fulfilment.

In the choice of a plot one must always bear in mind the conditions of the stage, and, above all, the length of time allowed for a stage play, and the form into which it is to be shaped. It is seldom advisable to choose for a theme one

which requires the development and change of character. There are exceptions to every rule, and we have had successful plays which have turned upon a very great psychological change, usually for the better, in some principal character, as, for instance, Dick Phenyl in "Sweet Lavender," and Goldfinch in "A Pair of Spectacles." These plays, however, fulfil admirably all the requirements of a successful play; they are intensely human, and the incidents all tend to develop the character drawing. The theme of each play is this psychological development of character, but then in each case the transformation wrought is of a kind which proceeds naturally from one particular influence, and therefore, could easily be set forth in a play which showed the coming of the influence across the path of the character and the resulting events. The type of psychological change which it is difficult to work in a play is the type which takes place gradually, because due to an accumulation of influences acting along the years. Speaking generally, a theme which takes too long a time to develop is a theme which does not lend itself to stage treatment, unless the very essence of the theme lies in the lapse of years between each incident, as in the case of "Milestones."

When choosing a theme for the stage one must always bear in mind the fact that a play must work up to a climax. Unless there is an increasing interest and development there is no play: monotony upon the stage is always deadly.

The simplest form of plot for a novice to handle is that which centres round a big situation. This situation should come to its climax in the penultimate act of the play. The first act will be more or less introductory, and the last act a rounding off and a knitting together of the various threads employed in the play. It is much easier to write a play which depends upon a big situation than to handle a subject of a more leisurely kind, where events are not of an exciting nature. In other words, drama is easier to handle than comedy, because, given the big situation which makes it drama, it practically writes itself; but comedy depends upon finish and detail, and, above all, upon the polished wit of its dialogue. Farce, on the other hand, may be either very difficult or very easy to write. It is not easy to hit upon a really laughable theme; they are very few and far between; but, given a situation that is in itself funny, it is comparatively easy to build-up the structure of a farce if one has the knack of let-

ting oneself go and rioting irresponsibly in the fun that springs naturally from the situation. On the other hand, a farce that does not build round a really funny situation is a very difficult thing to construct, as it has to be fostered and coddled, and built-up by the artifice of witty line and humorous character drawing, droll incident and burlesque business, until more ingenuity has been bestowed upon it than would go to the writing of an encyclopædia. It is always marvellous to me that people despise farce. If the writing of farce were really the cheap and easy thing the supercilious think it we should have little else upon the stage, for nothing pays so well as a good farce. But, alas! they are very few and far between: the good farce is epoch-making.

In starting to write a play one has to bear in mind the exigencies of play-form, by which, of course, I mean the divisions into acts. Some of our modern audiences are impatient at the intervals which are, however, necessary to rest the principal members of the cast, and which are as welcome to one section of the audience as they are anathematised by the other. We, of the inner circle, are all bending our brains to think of plans by which our plays can be bridged over between the acts by an interlude

of such a nature that the principal members of the cast will not be employed in it, and half the audience can go out if they wish. But, until this new method has been devised, plays will still continue to be written in the old three or four act form, and it is of this form that we will now speak.

Each act must finish with an effective curtain, and the interest in each act should progress in an ascending scale; the note of the final curtain being one which, as we say in our familiar slang, will "send the audience away happy." I wish to lay particular stress on the fact that the interest must be on an ascending scale. It is quite a commonplace among us that nine plays out of ten will boast "the best first act you have ever read." Author after author comes round to me with this pleasing intelligence to retire utterly crushed when I quote our managerial axiom: "Too good a first act damns the play." Yet the reason for this is obvious. If you awaken in the minds of the audience anticipation which you do not afterwards fulfil, you are bound to send them away dissatisfied. An extremely good first act touches a level which it is impossible to maintain, and the result can only be anti-climax.

The note of a first act should be expectancy.

The characters must be introduced and the general position explained quite easily and naturally, so that the explanation is discreetly veiled and yet perfectly clear; and the whole action of the act should lead us gently on to the expectation of something very interesting to come.

In the second act—if the play is in four-act form—we need a development of this expectancy and the shadow cast by coming events in darker and more startling hues. In the third act the events themselves; and in the fourth act a solution of the difficulty which should take the form of a surprise; for a last act which is simply a foregone conclusion is a thing which no modern manager will consider for one moment.

Everything depends on the progress of the action; and perhaps it would be as well for me to explain here what the word “action”—so familiarly used where plays are concerned—really means. Action is anything that makes for movement. Either the development of events, or the tightening of interest, or business relating to humour, or the working up of a humorous situation; anything that gives scope for movement on the stage; a significant change of position or facial expression; everything, in short, that is not merely spoken dialogue. Even dia-

logue itself may be in the nature of action if it develops the progress of the plot.

The worst fault a play can have is lack of action. As I have said before, the primary appeal of the stage is to the eye. If the eye is interested the ear will listen, but not otherwise. If we merely wished to hear we should go to a lecture. When we go to the stage we expect to see the presentment of character and events, and it is that presentment that gives the stage its peculiar charm. Action is, therefore, the most essential quality in any play, and in choosing a plot action must be the first consideration. A play that does not lend itself to action is practically useless for the stage. It would be better to treat it in novel form, the easy narrative of which could carry us along through a leisure hour without an undue tax on our patience or the author's ingenuity. But where the stage is concerned action is a *sine quâ non*, and a plot that does not lend itself to action is better eschewed.

Having chosen the plot, which must contain in itself the germs of the principal characters, one must see that plot in scenes, and the number of scenes must be kept strictly down to the exigencies of stage structure. Some plots shape themselves easily into three or four scenes,

which become, of course, the three or four acts of the play. Others require considerable handling before they can be shaped into the requisite form. One sees them, first of all, in too many scenes, and some readjustment of the main idea is needed to fit them to stage requirements. One curious point forces itself on the attention of anyone accustomed as I am to altering plays to suit the requirements of various managers, and this is that practically every theme can be seen from several points of view and would develop equally well in very different ways.

A few years ago there were two plays in the west-end, one a farce and the other a drama; as different in quality, therefore, as they could be, but which were yet built on the same main idea. In each play the principal character has been told in the first act that he (or she) has only a very short while to live, and the other two acts deal with the effect of this intelligence on that character and the events it brings in its train. The two plays of which I speak were "Never say Die," one of the most delightful farces in which Charles Hawtrey has ever appeared, and "Driven"—Temple Thurston's very interesting comedy done at the Haymarket with Alexandra Carlisle in the principal part.

In spite of this similarity of theme no two plays could possibly have differed more in plot, the treatment in each case being as the poles asunder.

An author must, first of all, decide upon the type of treatment which he is going to give to his play. Having made up his mind upon the main lines, he must then bring his intelligence to bear upon the far more difficult matter of handling his work in such a way that it shall seem both natural and new. It is easy to be original if one sets probability at defiance: it is easy to be natural if one is humdrum. But to be both original and natural; to create from beginning to end of one's play an impression of spontaneity so that the whole thing shall seem to be taking place at that moment before the eyes of the audience, and the illusion never be disturbed by the intruding thought of the author's mental effort, is a very difficult thing. It is the cream of the dramatist's art to keep the illusion perfect from beginning to end, and that can never be if the technique is visible. All suggestion of the laborious must be carefully hidden away. I think myself that it is wiser for an author to build-up his scenario before starting to write his play. Before I give any advice on this subject I want to explain that

we use the word "scene" in a double sense. Firstly, we use it to mean the scenery, and, secondly, we use it to refer to that portion of the dialogue which is spoken with one set of characters on the stage. Directly another character comes on, or one of those already on goes off, we call it a "fresh scene." For instance, in Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" the play opens with Antonio, Salarino, and Solanio. This, in the sense in which we are now using the word, is a scene. Then Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano come on: there are now six people on the stage. This is another scene. Eventually Lorenzo, Gratiano, Solanio and Salarino go off, leaving Bassanio and Antonio, making yet another scene; and in foreign plays this is the sole way in which the word "scene" is used. It is in this sense that we shall have to use the word when speaking of building-up a scenario.

When you have decided upon your characters and plot, arrange the progress of that plot in such a way that the action will shape itself into three or four acts, being careful to keep the climax of the action for the end of the penultimate act. Then fix upon your "curtains" so that each act builds-up to something of a climax, and the act ends at a moment strong

enough to maintain the interest in the minds of the audience during the interval.

Having thus broadly divided your action into parts which correspond with the acts, take each act by itself and make a rough list of the scenes that will be required for that act in their due order. For instance, to speak again of the "Merchant of Venice," the scenario of Act I, Scene I, would be as follows:—

SCENE. *On the Rialto.*

Antonio, Solanio, Salarino.

Antonio, Solanio, Salarino, Bassanio, Lorenzo,
Gratiano.

Antonio, Bassanio.

This indicates the people who will be on in each scene, and if the author cannot trust his memory, or wishes to submit the scenario for an expert's opinion, he should add a few words on the business of each scene after the names of the characters in it:

SCENE. *On the Rialto.*

Antonio, Solanio, Salarino.

They talk of Antonio's sadness and the reason for it: "His argosies tossing on the ocean," etc.

Antonio, Solanio, Salarino, Bassanio, Lorenzo, Gratiano.

They continue the discussion.

Antonio, Bassanio.

Bassanio wishes to borrow money of Antonio to enable him to go to Belmont and woo Portia, whose father has left a curious will. Antonio tells him he has not the money, but will use his credit to procure it.

When he has thus made a skeleton of the action of his whole play he can begin to write it with less fear that his pen will run away with him, otherwise the pleasure of writing some particular scene might lead him to dwell on it in a way that would throw out the proportions of the whole play.

When writing the play he should rough out his dialogue, first bearing in mind the fact that he must go carefully over every line of the play after it is written, and write it up for crispness, wit, and humour. After a play is written it has to be rewritten and rewritten again, because every little extra bit of polish and finish is invaluable. The structure, however, must be got right before this polishing can be attempted, as, if the play is structurally wrong, it will never hold the attention of an audience.

CHAPTER IV

HOW TO SELECT AND DIFFERENTIATE THE CHARACTERS

I have said in the preceding chapter that the plot chosen must contain in itself the germs of the principal characters; in other words, that the plot must develop from the characters. It is obvious that this plot is not going to be interesting unless the characters concerned in it are interesting. Any plot which turns upon the meaner qualities of our human nature is better avoided, unless it is possible to set these little human foibles before us in such a way that they only increase our sense of fellow-feeling, as has been done successfully by the great comedians of all time. Goldsmith's "She Stoops to Conquer" has a main plot which is built entirely round the foible of bashfulness—a bashfulness, moreover, which takes the very human form of rushing into boastfulness on certain occasions. Yet the whole comedy is full of charm, because young Marlowe, in spite of this weakness—one might even say because of it—has the dear, lovable heart of gold so character-

istic of his author. Write round the sins and follies and temptations of this world by all means, but be careful to fill in all the details of the character. Place the sterling qualities side by side with the human weaknesses, and above all, never forget the all-important Charm.

One of the worst faults a play can possess is want of individuality in its leading parts. Many a one comes into my hands in which all the secondary characters are admirably touched off; they are what we call "character parts," and their idiosyncrasies are distinctively and nicely handled; but the leading part is merely that of a walking gentleman, a lay figure, as little like a real human being as a tailor's dummy.

It is apparently more difficult to draw lovable youth than likeable age—the fault usually proceeding from a too great desire to aim at perfection. In trying to present a hero with no vices, we fall too often into the error of writing a leading character with no traits of any kind whatever. He speaks correctly, dots his "i's," and one feels that he would wear immaculate clothes and always do exactly the right thing—but he leaves one frozen to the very marrow of one's bones. The heroine is even worse! If she sheds a well-behaved tear one is sure that

she would never blow her nose! Unless the author has the divine gift of wit he is apt to give no colour to his leading part whatever. Yet it is not necessary for a hero to bubble over with brilliance: one can have too much of a good thing, and even the sparkling hero of American comedy, admirable as is each presentment of him, might in time become monotonous.

There are other lovable characteristics besides breeziness. Even silence can be made to speak. The one great thing is to have a dominating trait in every leading character. We may feel we hate him and end by loving him if he is strong enough to stir emotion in us. The unforgivable sin is the character that does not live, never has lived, never could live, because he is not a living being but a mere creation of colourless words.

I said in my first chapter that the great quality characteristic of all stage success is *ensemble*. Even the author's task of writing the play depends for its success upon ensemble. You want a wide outlook where the stage is concerned: the gift of the embracing eye. No one scene in a play can be written for itself alone; the balance of the whole is all-important.

It is perfectly true that it is only the big scene in a play which really counts; but if this

big scene is to make its effect all the rest of the play must be a preparation and development of it. We have in our stage slang one very effective word—we speak of certain parts as “feeding” parts, and say of certain actors that they are “good feeders.” A “feeding” part is a part that feeds another part. A “good feeder” is an actor whose work is so unselfishly artistic that everything he does upon the stage tends to increase the value of the work of the other actors. No good feeder ever gets his due appreciation from the audience, but we, inside the profession, know that to be a good feeder is the rarest, and from the artistic point of view the most valuable, of all qualities. It is to my mind a temperamental quality, and requires both unselfishness and brain. Well, in exactly the same way the less important scenes in a play should be all feeding scenes: every word should go to the building-up of the big point. In a similar manner all the characters should be chosen with a view to the ensemble, and apart from their own value must have the additional value of feeding the principal parts. In other words, they must be carefully chosen as foils to one another.

Even the appearance of the characters must be considered with reference to the ensemble,

as on these things the whole illusion hangs. I have known a dramatist for the sake of a little fun introduce a humorous character who was entirely out of keeping with the social atmosphere of the play, and, when this was pointed out to him, he said it would be the manager's business to get an actor who could play it in such a manner that it would not be out of keeping! Authors expect such miracles from actors!

The necessity for keeping the illusion absolutely unbroken will often oblige an author to sacrifice a good idea if it is out of keeping with the tone of the main theme. Violent contrasts are dangerous, yet contrast is most necessary. The old saying that "everything is by comparison" is particularly true of the stage, and the value of no scene will be felt to the full unless it is thrown into relief by contrasting scenes. This contrast of scene must depend largely on a well-judged contrast of character, since the wording of the dialogue will turn upon the type of phrase that would be typical of each character.

Yet though contrast is very necessary, probability is equally important. I have often been amazed at the strain that is put on our credulity in the drawing of the members of one fam-

ily. It is sometimes impossible to believe that any parents could have such widely differing offspring, and the relative ages of their children make imagination gasp! If one turns to the works of great writers one will find, that, consciously or unconsciously, their genius has guided them aright in this matter, even though they may have lived and written centuries before the subject of heredity was scientifically considered. Take Shakespeare, for example; what children could be more typical of Polonious than Laertes and Ophelia, and is not Hamlet himself the inevitable son of his warlike father and charming, inconstant mother? I am quite sure that Shakespeare held no theories on the subject of heredity; he merely wrote as his innate sense of proportion dictated. All authors are conscious of this innate sense, but its manifestations, where their actual work is concerned, are sometimes hard to discover. However, they are always willing to come round and point them out!

I freely concede the fact that an audience taken as a whole can be exceedingly dense; it is one of the first duties of a dramatist to be sure that he has made his meaning perfectly clear. He cannot afford to take any risks, and where a large number of people are concerned

there is always the risk that the attention of a certain proportion will be diverted at a critical moment so that some very necessary explanatory line fails to reach their ears. Therefore it is well to say, and say again, everything that is vital to the development of the plot, and for the same reason it is essential to lay stress on the dominating attributes of the various characters. But though an audience can be dense, it is also in many ways singularly sensitive; sensitive above all things to impressions, without always knowing why. It feels in a moment the jar of a discordant note. Although it will not be able to put its finger on that discord and explain exactly what it is that has shocked its susceptibilities, yet the sense of shock remains: it is as if one were rudely awakened from a dream. This keen susceptibility on the part of an audience makes it necessary to have every detail of the character drawing of a play well adjusted, for however unintellectual we may be and however dormant our reasoning faculties, we are all human, and we have within us an instinct of human nature. If the characters are unconvincing the play will be unconvincing, and no amount of clever writing will atone.

The characters must be lifelike, but an audi-

ence may be trusted to jump quickly to the impression of the entire character if the keynote of that character is sounded with decision. Molière, whose comedies will go down for all time as the triumph of satiric truth, made his vivid impression by the firm way in which he seized upon a dominating quality, and sounded that note again and again and again, until he left upon the mind of the onlooker the impression of the full enharmonic values of that note. When we read "L'avare" we think not of avarice only but of the whole gamut and combinations of the avaricious nature. We see, not the one thing, but all that springs from it. In writing for the stage, one must never fail to strike one's note with decision.

The whole conditions of the stage are beyond nature. The space of a stage is beyond that of an average room; the lighting is infinitely more brilliant; voices have to be raised, and expression and gesture magnified. So only can a natural illusion be produced, since it is obvious that the stage itself being life size, a life size effect seen in that setting would appear more insignificant than life itself.

To produce a lifelike illusion on the stage one has to exaggerate in proportion to the proportions of the stage: in the same way must the

author who writes for the stage suit his proportions to the conditions of the stage. He must underline and emphasise what is essential, and he must eliminate what is not essential.

In handling his characters he must seize upon the important characteristic and pin it down, drawing the attention of the audience to that characteristic and keeping it there. Illusion thus created will enable the audience to jump to his intention and to fill in details for themselves. But if there is any uncertainty in the writing, so that the character is shadowy in outline and vague in its intent, the audience will receive no clear message from the stage, and will go home with the unsatisfied feeling that they have been given a stone for bread.

The types of character for stage use should not be too difficult to understand. Intricate psychology is very dangerous; there is no time to develop it in detail, and a stage performance does not allow of that careful study on the part of its audience that a book would get from an intelligent reader. When enjoying a work by Henry James, if any little point is not clear to one, one can turn back and reread a previous passage. But if through any cause some important point in a play should not reach the intelligence of the audience, they cannot stop the

play and say, "Will you kindly give us that scene again?" They have to leap to the author's intention impressionistically then and there, and for this reason impressionist work is frequently the most telling where the stage is concerned.

Originality is a great gift, but a very unusual type of character is better avoided, as the greater part of the audience would probably refuse to believe in its existence. What one wants in this, as in most details of stage work, is the happy blend of novelty and age-long truth. We must have the types with whom we are familiar in everyday life, the types we recognise at a glance as real human beings; but we must also have the touch of illusion in the charm with which these types are presented to us. If every man in the audience can put himself ideally in the position of the hero, if every woman sees herself as the heroine, the play is absolutely assured of success, and for this result to be achieved, hero and heroine need only have in them the broad traits that are common to us all. But they must have character: if they are colourless they will make no impression on our imaginations.

Even as a grousy, discontented mind, though it may win a certain reluctant admiration for

its cleverness, never really makes friends and is never really acceptable as a companion, so a grousy, discontented point of view is never the point of view that is going to help the success of a play. Make fun of this point of view if you please; use it in a secondary character, as Goldsmith used it in old Craker; call on the audience to laugh at it, and you may make a hit; but to write your play from a peevish point of view and call it realism is simply to ask the world to pay money for a fit of depression! Grousy writing does no one any good and never will. It seems to me narrowing, spine-snapping, irritating; and at the back of my mind I cherish the conviction that writing of that sort is very easy to do!

Take the bright point of view because it is the broad point of view, and because any other point of view is simply cowardly. See the evils of life merely for what they are—the necessary ills which teach us to appreciate and to which we owe by contrast our whole faculty of enjoyment. Lay on the dark colours only that they may heighten the uplifting power of the light.

Let us have people about us whom we can like; people who increase our sense of comfort and goodwill. It is just as unpleasant to meet tiresome people on the stage as it is to meet

them in real life: it is just as dragging to have to watch the vampire type grouse through a play as to have him buttonholing one and draining out one's energy in one's daily existence. Give us the bright, cheery soul, who is a tonic, on the stage and off. Let us leave the theatre "feeling good"—at one with all our fellow-beings.

Lovable characters make a play lovable: perfection is unlovable. The little everyday failings of humanity are lovable if they are sown in good soil. Let us laugh both at and with the characters of a play, but do not ask us to admire the cleverness of the author when we should be all-absorbed in his creations! I have read so many plays which seem to be crying out on every page for adulation. This is wrong: a play should seem to write itself, and the more really alive the characters are the less impression we should receive that the author has been consciously trying to make them so. Choose homely types and let them speak for themselves. Let us have around us the men and women whom we know, so that our friends seem to have stepped on the stage for our delight.

CHAPTER V

THE ART OF WRITING CHARACTERISTIC AND TELLING LINES

This chapter follows naturally from the last, because however polished, however witty, dialogue may be, unless it is characteristic it is not alive. The play that is built-up of witty lines is so amusing to read that the judgment even of an expert on stage matters may sometimes be thrown out by it. When seen in rehearsal such a play is found to be lifeless. Where the stage is concerned, no substitute can ever really take the place of human nature.

Moreover, there is a monotony of wit, which becomes in time as tiring as a monotony of dullness. If every line scintillates with wordy fireworks the strain upon the audience will be serious. It was one of the late James Welch's favourite axioms that successful farce reduced itself to a study of breaths! Unless you allow an audience breathing space between the laughs, that they may recover from the first before they start laughing again, they will become exhausted, and instead of leaving the theatre with

a sense of enjoyment will have upon them the depression of reaction. The young author, if he is wittily inclined, will make the mistake of giving his audience too many good things. The brain tires; and nothing is really appreciated unless it is presented with a due regard for contrast and variety.

One of the most usual faults in the dialogue of an inexperienced writer is that any one of his speeches might be spoken by any one of the characters: they all seem to think and talk in the same way. Now it may be true that in the various social strata there is an average mode of speech, but, on consideration, we find that this is more apparent than real. We may think and speak alike with regard to the commonplaces of life; but when anything happens that is a little out of the way temperament immediately comes to the fore and our speech is coloured by our point of view. On the stage, where insignificant trifles are crowded out by the exigencies of time and action, this differentiation must always be to the fore. We have no time to make mistakes in the course of a modern play, and the duller side of life must give place to the dramatic moment. Monotony, even though it may take the form of wit, is stultifying to the action of the play: it calls off

the attention of the audience and fixes it on the word rather than on the fact.

One of the first things a dramatist has to learn when studying stage technique is to avoid every temptation to digress, even though the digression be brilliant, for the whole art of riveting the attention of an audience lies in the steady building-up of the main idea, and any herring across the trail will disturb the attention and shatter the illusion. Ruthlessly sacrifice anything and everything that distracts from the vital point.

Verbosity, of course, is a deadly sin. We often refer to what we call the three-line limit for speeches, although, of course, we do not keep strictly to this. All rules are made to be broken, but it is, nevertheless, as well to remember that three lines of type-written script are a sufficient length for any but a most important speech upon the stage. If a manager opening a manuscript can see at a glance that the dialogue is written in short, crisp sentences, he will incline to consider the play; but if he sees great blocks of speeches, chunks of type-written stuff doled out to each of the characters, he will certainly never take the trouble to read the play because he will know at once that it is hopeless. Nothing is more monoto-

nous than a number of long speeches condemning the other actors to stand round and "look silly"; all the art in the world will not give a natural appearance to a stage on which one character speaks at an inordinate length and the others listen an inordinate time. We all know that this would be very dull in real life where we have all suffered from the verbose bore and have longed to interrupt and have our own way. We are certainly not going to pay money to experience the same in a theatre!

I have often marvelled at quarrel scenes upon the stage, where each character sets forth his point of view in a flow of rhetoric to which the other persons in the quarrel listen attentively, waiting until the first has finished before starting off on their own. Now, my experience of a quarrel in real life is that everybody talks at once—and the loudest wins!

If it is absolutely necessary for one character to give an account which is bound to occupy a certain number of words, ingenuity on the part of the author will enable him to break up what would otherwise be a long speech, by means of interruptions and questions from the other characters on the stage. I have known authors who know how this can be done, and who yet have written their play with the long speeches

unbroken, and have asked me to show it in that form to managers, saying, "But surely they know it can be broken up?" I have always refused, because it is obviously absurd to ask a busy manager to waste his time reading a play which even the author admits is not in shape.

Many authors, for the sake of saving themselves a little trouble, spoil their own chances by sending up plays in an imperfect form. If the manager can be induced to read them he cannot accept them like that and so returns them, and all that happens is that the author has to take the trouble in the end, and when he again sends up his play in a revised version the manager finds it dull. Having read it before it has no longer the charm of novelty. Both in regard to long speeches, and in other ways, an author will frequently ask me to show an imperfect play to a manager, saying that if he is interested in it he (the author) will then take the trouble to get it into shape. In other words, he is saying in his mind to that manager—who is probably one of the busiest men on earth—"Waste your time; I can't bother to waste mine."

Short, crisp sentences are always better for the stage, because they are the speech of everyday life. I constantly deplore the lack of style,

and even grammar, in the modern novel; but colloquialism is more than a virtue; it is essential in the modern play. Be as slangy as you please; be as incorrect in grammar as you please; *be natural*; always write "shan't," never "shall not"; write, in short, as people speak, and above all, let the character speak characteristically.

In the old days much use was made of certain catch phrases technically called "gags." The humorous part in a well-known farce was always exclaiming, "Oh! arn't we having a time," and other wheezes of a similar nature were caught up by the audiences of those days and quoted with as much enjoyment as the air of a popular number from a musical comedy will now be caught up and whistled. This method has gone out because we feel it unnatural, but, for all that, if we study the people we know, we shall find that practically everyone has certain words or phrases which they use habitually in preference to others. If more study were given to this matter we should find our friends' speech to be really much more characteristic of them than we were inclined to think, and if these characteristic turns of phrase were slightly accentuated for stage use, in the same way as stage "make-up" accen-

tuates the actors' features, we should find that we could write very characteristic dialogue without any descent from the canons of art. Authors too often start with the idea that to write effective characters for the stage they have got to use grotesque exaggeration. This is not the case at all. All they really have to do is to keep their point of view clearly before the eyes of the audience. In other words, their intention in writing that character must be emphasised again and again, and the characteristic phrase repeated perhaps more often than would actually occur in real life.

But there is no need to draw the character on lines outside nature. A play is really a concentrated presentment of some episode, and in writing that play one deliberately eliminates all that does not concern that episode. It is this process of elimination in the shaping of the plot which should also be the ruling factor in the wording of the dialogue. By crowding out the superfluous and retaining only the essentials one necessarily gets an effect of concentration which brings out the salient points of the dialogue, and shows them thrown up in high relief because stripped of superfluous matter. Therefore, it follows that all the characters say would be essentially characteristic of them, be-

cause they are being shown at their most characteristic moment. Dialogue that is interlarded with a great deal of superfluous matter is wearisome on the stage: it is a mere waste of time to listen to it.

I am always fighting the author who thinks that effective writing is "mere melodrama!" He tells me that his play, which is not dramatic in any sense of the word, is "a bit of real life." All I can say is that I am very sorry for those mortals whose lives are as dull as that play! Mine isn't: I shouldn't let it be. Life is not dull. Even if duty compels us to put up with a humdrum existence, whether that humdrum existence is dull or not depends upon ourselves. Life is as we see it. The author who sees life as *dull* is himself a dull dog.

There is an enormous difference between the relative values of the written and the spoken line. No line will speak well unless its acoustic qualities are good and unless its construction allows the speaker to take breath at the right moment. Certain vowels and consonants carry better than others, and the choice of names to be spoken on the stage should be guided by a little consideration of their acoustic value. I have often had my attention distracted from the story of a play by the worrying inability

to hear clearly a certain name which various members of the cast seemed to pronounce differently. I am not referring merely to names which *are* pronounced differently by various members of the cast, because this is an error due to carelessness on the part of the producer which, to my mind, is entirely inexcusable; but there are certain words the acoustic qualities of which are so imperfect that they carry with different effect when spoken by different voices. If it is necessary for a name to be spoken often in a play I should advise the author himself to test the carrying qualities of that name by going to various parts of the house during rehearsal, and if he finds that there is any doubt, changing the name for another that will better stand the test.

For the same reason, as he hears his lines spoken on the stage he will aid the producer to change the wording of any sentence with a view to a greater acoustic value. Music is all-important in the wording of a play: I mean, of course, the music of the spoken voice and the blending of the word-tones. Here, as in everything else, monotony must be avoided; even the monotony of music! Discord is a necessary foil, and dialogue that is too smoothly written becomes lethargic. The art of effective dia-

logue is very largely the art of effective sound—sound which is the vehicle of sense and its interpreter.

Keep your emphatic words for the end of your sentence, and do not make those sentences too long-winded or the actor's breath will fail him just when he needs it to make his point. Some ten years ago complaint was made against the actors of the time that they dropped their voices at the end of every sentence, swallowing their last few words. I believe myself that this was partly the fault of the dramatists, who, at that period, were writing three-barrelled sentences of involved structure, which were exhausting to speak and which did not allow of any lifted inflection towards the end. When dramatists write crisply they get their lines crisply delivered: when dramatists write effective scenes they get effective acting. If we look back along the history of the drama we shall find that great acting dies off our stage when great scenes cease to appear in our plays. When the talky-talky play comes in, the actor of talent makes way for the drawing-room puppet.

Anyone who has translated from the French knows that to translate literally means that the English sense will drown itself in words.

To get the spirit of the original it is better to translate crisply and liberally. Yet, how dramatically Frenchmen speak, in spite of the fact that they are using six words to our one. They economise emphasis with the result that, when the keyword shoots out, it rings like a pistol shot. But we, in England, speak with a barrel-organ grind; we seem to be bumping on far too many words because our speech is so much slower; our tongues have not the knack of tripping. For this reason it is the more necessary for a dramatist to word his sentences with care. Don't give the actor too much to say, but be sure that what he says has point. A dull passage in English is infinitely more serious than a dull passage in French, because it takes so much longer to deliver.

Pace is a vital point where acting is concerned, and the fate of a play will often depend on the pace at which it is played; especially the pace at which its lines are spoken. I remember seeing an adaptation of a French farce played over here by English comedians unused to farce pace. Of all mistakes to make in casting it is perhaps the worst to put a comedian into farce or a farcical actor into comedy. Extremes meet, and a great farce actor will often be a great tragedian, because farce is played

quickly and the tension of a dramatic moment often requires an acceleration of speed. But comedy is more leisurely, and that leisurely habit once acquired is difficult to cast off.

Now this question of pace vitally concerns the wording of a play. In comedy one can afford oneself more rounded sentences; but where pace is a *sine quâ non* no stumbling-block must be put in the speaker's mouth. The words must be carefully chosen to rattle and rap at will.

It is as essential that the climax of the sentence should come towards its end as it is that the climax of an act should be its curtain. As each act should be built to rouse expectancy in the minds of the audience, so each sentence should be built to carry on tension to the next. If speeches tail off into unimportant words there will be a perceptible break of the tension before the next speech commences.

We have two characteristic phrases which we use of acting and of writing: we say that such and such an actor or such and such a speech "lets a scene down," whereas another speech or actor "picks it up again." If, in a duologue scene, one of the actors is inferior to the other, he will keep "letting it down," and will make the task of the other actor doubly difficult be-

cause he has given him nothing to play to. It is like a game of ball between two players, where one is perpetually dropping the ball and obliging the other to pick it up and start again.

The success of every scene depends on sustained tension, and the illusion is bound to suffer if any mistake on the part of either actors or author lets that tension down. It is all a question of sustaining. If then the author writes his dialogue in sentences so constructed that each one comes to an end in a tail of unimportant words, it is practically impossible to sustain the tension. Keep your big words for the end of your sentence, and put your filling-up words earlier, cutting them ruthlessly down to the least possible. When Flaubert was training de Maupassant to write, he set him a theme each day. The next day de Maupassant would bring him his written version of this theme. Flaubert would read it through and say, "Very good; now go back and cut out every unnecessary word." That should be the golden rule of the dramatist.

CHAPTER VI

PREPARATION: MOTIVES AND PLAUSIBILITY:

ENTRANCES AND EXITS

Preparation is our word for those intricate details of stage technique which tend to make a play easier to follow. They are in themselves very subtle, yet their effect is to make the writing clear, to suggest the right impressions to the minds of the audience, and ease them of all need of puzzling out the author's intention for themselves.

Everything depends upon suggestion: every branch of art and science now recognises its power. If one can suggest to the audience the type of character one is setting before them one will have no trouble in explaining motives; explanation will be almost superfluous, as the psychology of the character will carry in itself its own excuse. When writing a play one has got to accomplish the seeming impossibility of explaining everything without explanation. To have to listen to an explanation is very tedious, yet every detail of a play must be both plausible and clear. How to accomplish this is

the crux of the whole matter, and suggestion the answer to the problem. If the right impression is produced, the minds of the audience will leap to the explanation, but in producing this impression every detail of the stage must blend. Atmosphere is everything: it can be created by the very set of the scene before ever a word is spoken. Some specially chosen ornament upon the stage will strike a cord in the imaginations of the audience which afterwards will complete the harmony of the whole play. Such a point as this may be called preparation, since it serves to prepare the onlooker for something which is afterwards to come to light. For instance, if it were essential in the plot of a play that the owner of the room in which the action takes place had relations in China, the presence of some unusual china bowl, although it might never be referred to, would yet have sounded in the minds of the audience the suggestion of China, which would afterwards serve to prepare the revelation.

The whole art of preparation is to make us ready to receive as probable the intelligence that the author later in the play wishes to put before us as a surprise. I have said before that on the modern stage surprise is the *sine quâ non*: we must have something unexpected

in every successful play. We are all too sophisticated to be entertained any longer by the obvious; but surprise is relative, and if the technique of a play is amateurish would be apt merely to awaken an irritating incredulity.

The greater and more effective a surprise is to be, the more carefully must that surprise be prepared. No hint must be given of its coming; yet when it comes, in spite of the fact that it is entirely unanticipated, we must say, "Of course!" It must seem to us the right thing, if not we shall feel that the whole play is wrong.

I have here tried to define preparation in its broadest sense. Not only the big surprise of a play needs to be prepared, but every detail which is to arrest attention. If the author will bear in mind that the purpose of preparation is to explain without explaining, to make clear without tedious narrative, he will see how vital it is. For instance, if the personality of his central figure is to grip the audience, they must be led to imagine that that personality is arresting. Of course this impression cannot be sustained unless the character is well drawn, but half the battle will be won if the audience is ready to take an interest in him before he appears. The preparation of a principal char-

acter, therefore, lies in the art of having the other characters talk about him just enough to excite interest, so that when he actually comes on the stage we shall be curious to see him, and our attention will fix itself willingly upon him. If his first entrance is of an effective nature he will at once set our imagination working, and we shall follow all he does with expectancy.

Not only have characters to be prepared; events and facts must also have their due preparation. "Coming events cast their shadows before," and the shadows of the coming events in a well-written play must be very delicately cast by the figures which precede them. Shock is unpleasant; it is more than unpleasant, it is dangerous; and the fine susceptibilities of an audience must never be submitted to it. The more effective a surprise is to be the more convincing it must be, and to make it convincing, infinite trouble must be taken to handle the preceding scenes of the play so that delicate hints shall have been given which have conveyed just enough and not too much.

We have said before that the plot of a play must proceed from the character writing. The germ of motive, of course, is contained in the character writing, and if that is clear the

motive for the actions of the characters must of necessity be clear. Little things show character, and without diverging from the main plot it is often possible to throw sidelights which are very illuminating. Even the choice of a cake in a tea scene can be used to portray character, and without delaying the progress of the dialogue. For instance, suppose the main theme of a play depended upon the attraction of a very brilliant man for a certain woman, and that the climax turned on her discovering, just at the last moment, that in spite of his magnetic personality he was selfish in grain. It would spoil the whole play if this selfishness were given away too soon, yet, it might be suggested subtly. Early in the play there might be a drawing room scene; tea is being served; the man is talking gaily to the heroine; another woman brings him a dish of cakes over which, while still talking, his fingers hover uncertainly. He is about to choose one, sees another which he likes better, hesitates, and finally helps himself to the best of the lot, taking so long about it that the girl holding the dish shows faintly, but unmistakably, that she is getting tired. This little bit of business would not in any way interrupt the progress of the play as the dialogue would be going on all

the time, yet it would leave a very distinct impression on the minds of the audience that, where his personal satisfactions were concerned, that man was regardless of the comfort of others. This incident, combined with the man's brilliant talk, would give us an immediate snapshot of his character. After this, if the author wished, he might safely bring out all the fascinations of the man, sure that, when the big surprise of the play turned on his innate selfishness, the audience would be prepared to accept that selfishness as credible. Where plausibility is concerned it is trifles that count.

The relationship of the various characters to one another and their social status can be indicated without verbal explanation by means of similar devices of preparation: this is essentially a matter in which ingenuity tells.

Entrances and Exits are a great stumbling-block to the beginner who does not know how to get his characters on and off the stage, and often leaves it very apparent that he has taken them off simply for the sake of getting them off or brought them on simply for the sake of bringing them on! I remember one play in which the author wanted to get rid of the heroine's mother because he wished to have a

love scene between her daughter and the young man. I said to him, "How are you going to do it?" to which he replied, "Oh! that is easy enough," so he made her say, "I think I hear the milkman," and depart. As she was supposed to be a woman in a good social position this did not seem quite so convincing to me as it did to him.

There must always be a reason for everything on the stage, whether that reason is set down in words or not. Characters that wander aimlessly on and off get on one's nerves; they convey at once a sense of restlessness which is infectious, and the audience begins to fidget. An author can never afford to forget the power of illusion over his audience. So real are the happenings on the stage to some of us that even the most intelligent will be carried out of themselves while the spell is on them. My father, a hardened playgoer of an essentially mathematical and argumentative brain, hated draughts. When a door was left open on a stage I have seen him, seated in the circle, put up his coat-collar.

Now this quality of faith is very precious; it is the greatest tribute an author can receive, but if he underrates it he deserves to fail. The trouble is to get him to understand that he is

underrating it when he puts too great a strain on it. To expect an audience to swallow the absolutely incredible is to treat it with contempt. It will follow you through thick and thin provided only that you preserve a sense of proportion. Build on any lines you like, but build harmoniously. Don't topple us down from the castle of dreams to the make-shift carelessness of a mud cabin.

I can forgive want of talent—that is not the author's fault; I can forgive want of knowledge—that with opportunity can be acquired—but I cannot forgive carelessness, and I know by a long experience that it is far too common a fault of would-be dramatic authors. They are obsessed by the idea that a play being short in length should give them little trouble to write, and that fortune comes easily to the dramatist. But the difficulty of literary effort is not a question of length, it is a question of technique; and the technique of playwriting is a study in itself. It can be learnt—my last three years of work with my School for Dramatists has proved that—but it can only be learnt with time and trouble, and the author who expects to succeed “first go off” is the author who does not deserve to succeed at all.

The tremendous gain that accrues to the au-

thor of one successful play has given many people the impression that writing plays is a fairy-tale task at which the deserving are sure to succeed. I do not deny this; on the contrary, I think the deserving do succeed; we differ simply in our definition of the word "*deserve*." What is worth having is worth paying for, and for my part I have no use for the temperament that is not prepared to pay for success with years and years of effort.

I have often found that some of the trouble with regard to Entrances and Exits can be smoothed over by a readjustment of the order of scenes. I am continually being reminded of Hans Andersen's parable about the princess who came one wet night to the door of a kingdom and begged the queen mother to let her in. She said that she was a *real* princess. The queen mother, however, had her doubts, and put her on a bed of twenty mattresses and twenty eiderdowns, and underneath the twenty mattresses and twenty eiderdowns she placed one small bean. Next morning she asked the princess how she had slept. "Horribly," said the princess, "I am simply black and blue! What was the matter with that bed?" Then the queen mother knew that underneath the twenty mattresses and twenty eiderdowns she

had yet detected the presence of the bean, and therefore she must be, without doubt, a *real* princess. When I was a child they used to call me "the princess on the bean," and that is exactly what an audience is. It will detect the presence of the bean and feel that it is black and blue all over, although it will never know why. Yet my experience as "Play Doctor" teaches me that very often when a play is wrong the thing that jars is but a trifle, and, once detected, can easily be removed. The trouble is to detect it—it is so smothered in those eiderdowns. An unconvincing reason for the coming on and going off of the characters will make quite a big bean and give an air of jerky improbability to the whole play which is annoying. Yet it is really easy to invent reasons for entrances and exits which can be woven into the progress of the action. This is one of the many points where taking trouble wins!

Owing to the difficulty of getting his characters on and off the stage one of the worst faults of a young author is usually a tendency to run to duologue scenes, that is to have only two people on the stage at a time. This is a bad fault, and, though it is even worse to have all your characters on talking alternately in pairs,

yet with a little ingenuity it would be easy to intersperse the *tête-à-têtes* with scenes which include more characters. You can cut any knot by a little thought. The trouble involved in writing a play is not the actual writing but the ingenuity required to get every detail smooth. To my mind, there is a fascination in this; it is like solving a very interesting puzzle, and I am much inclined to hold the view that, given a sufficient plot, there is no difficulty in the writing of a play which time and trouble cannot overcome.

With regard to the point at present under consideration—Entrances and Exits—a little extra care in the choice of scene and consideration of the occupations of the various characters will often solve it. Nowadays an author has so wide a choice: he can invent setting and environment which will meet the exigencies of his plot and allow his characters an ample excuse for all their comings and goings. These details must be thought out before the play is written, and there is usually more than one alternative which will fit the case and clear away the trouble.

We are no longer hampered, as were the dramatists of the last century, by a crowd of idle women in our plays, for whose presence on

the scene it was hard to account except under conventional conditions. The unemployed can be as tiresome on the stage as in real life, but nowadays, when there is so great a choice of occupation for both men and women, it is easy to select those occupations and environments which will give credulity to every detail of one's play.

CHAPTER VII

HUMOUR

No play nowadays is complete without humour. No point of view, to my mind, can be said to contain breadth unless it embraces humour. The most understanding outlook on life is one of humorous sympathy. As the world has grown older its sense of humour has grown with it: as civilisation strides forward our debt to the great humorists is more gratefully acknowledged.

Humour on the stage, as indeed elsewhere, is just a question of point of view. The same story can be told with thunder clouds piled black or with the silver lining showing through; and the more humour is brought to bear upon a dramatic situation the more effective by contrast is its drama. There is humour not only in situation but even in the ugliest characteristics of human nature when those characteristics are seen in the light of a playful fancy. Humour is the limelight of life, and, in its rays, much that before seemed dingy and common-

place becomes ethereal. Even selfishness may raise a smile.

Not long ago I was going to have a serious operation—in fact, three operations in one—and I was told to make my will and set my affairs in order. There is a certain Bore of my acquaintance who visits me periodically, grumbles at everything and everybody, and tries to wring from me a promise to make every manager whom I happen to know by her plays. Well, she wanted to see me on this particular morning: she informed my secretary that she must see me, although the latter endeavoured to explain matters and entreated her to stay away. “Don’t you understand,” said my secretary, “that Miss Platt has to go into the hospital to-night and has, therefore, only this morning to get everything in order? It is a most serious operation—literally a matter of life and death.” “Well,” replied the Bore, “I am in the dentist’s hands!” Now I think that story is very funny.

It is a mistake in a modern play to think that humour must be confined exclusively to certain characters and scenes introduced for the purpose of humorous relief. In the very old days, when comedy and tragedy were separated by an impassable barrier, this was the way in which

humour was first allowed to creep into more serious work; but it is not a method which should be imitated now. When we look back upon those old dramas we usually find that the comic relief in them is out of date, as humour, oddly enough, belongs to its age more inevitably than drama. Perhaps it is because it acts as scavenger, clearing away the plague spots of the world, and, therefore, having to serve its purpose age by age, partakes of the age it serves.

Humour must of its very nature be spontaneous: a laboured joke is no joke at all. Because of its spontaneity humour is very difficult to define, and one shrinks from laying down any hard and fast rules upon so mercurial a theme: still, one may venture to commit oneself thus far. Humour, to serve the purposes of playwriting at its best, must have its root in the point of view which governs the whole story: it must illuminate the theme, not merely adorn it. It must be woven into the character drawing, supplying that kindliness of judgment which a purely serious outlook upon life finds hard to yield.

We say that the breath of ridicule can kill more surely than poison: it stabs pride to the heart; but in the place of pride some other

quality more beautiful should spring, since the charm of humour is that it fertilises but never causes decay. On the contrary, it sweeps away disease and abnormality, spreading health-giving breeze and courage. Humour is meat and drink: though it may strike down evil it gives continually freshness and strength and magnetism. Nothing attracts like humour. The old idea that if you treat a subject humorously you treat it superficially only survives now among the undeveloped. The great humorists of the world have always had the heart to feel; and when enthusiasm is winged with humour it comes to its fullest power.

I have said in the previous chapter that it is a great mistake to try to be funny from beginning to end of a play. Fun, like everything else, has to be thrown into relief by contrast, and one of the most successful farces of modern times, "Potash and Perlmutter," was built upon a strongly dramatic plot. Its humour sprang from its character drawing, and Potash and Perlmutter being what they were, fun was assured. There was no need to force the note; it was there in the character drawing. Therefore the most potent way of working up humour in a play is to see the humorous side of the characters in conjunction with their dra-

matic force, and use the one as contrast to the other. The unobservant separate humour and emotion. This, of course, is a complete mistake. Humour is emotion, and in an emotional mood one is most prone to be overcome by humour. We laugh more easily when we are near tears: we cry with laughing. Humour can be the most powerful of emotions: it is certainly one of the greatest teachers. Nothing in the world opens our eyes like humour. It opens the eyes of the mind and it opens the eyes of the heart: it warms the blood.

I hear people of brains raging at the revues and other "piffle" which, according to them, so constantly disgrace our stage, and I think to myself, "You are only reaping what you have sown. For centuries past you have turned up your noses at a good laugh, you intellectuals, and now you are surprised because when the world, aching from its woes, demands to lay aside care in the healing atmosphere of a bit of fun, it finds too often that the only authors who will condescend to joke are those whose intellectual standard is not high, and therefore it is obliged to take what it can get!"

"Piffle" will never be chased off the stage by any high-brow attempt to ram grim tragedy down the gaping mouth of the public. We

must laugh: we have the sense to know that laughter is a tonic and that the only way in which we can gather strength to fight the present conditions of our lives is to shrug the whole weight off our shoulders whenever we can, and just let everything go in a good old irresponsible shout of laughter. If the high-brows really want to elevate the stage let them set to work to write good plays with a large allowance of laughter. Let them see the humorous side of even the grimmest tragedy; let them say, "Our philosophy of life is this, that fate can never kick us down while we keep our sense of humour."

Write good plays on this theme and the managers will say, "There is money in these plays," and will only be too eager to put them on.

What I want to emphasise and re-emphasise here is that the stage is an excellent vehicle for airing any point of view, and that the value of humour in a play lies in the fact that it can be used to drive home any healthy theory of life. If the writers of problem plays would only consider this they would find that they could serve their cause with infinitely more success by writing marketable plays than by being what we

now term "high-brow"; it is simply a matter of treatment.

Any theory of life will lend itself to humour, which, indeed, can be used as a weapon both of offence and defence. If the stage is ever to do the work which it ought to do; if it is ever to make good as an educational factor and teach the lessons of life from the highest point of view, that point of view must call to its aid the gift of humour. There was never thunder without lightning, and humour is the lightning of the gods!

For far too many centuries we have treated this enormous force as a mere buffoon; we have had in our hearts a sort of contempt for the humorist, and separated him rigidly from the thinker. One can cultivate humorous thought: it is a duty to do so. To deprecate humour is to show a lack of appreciation so extraordinary as to be scarcely human. The gift of humour is essentially the birthright of man, yet man has for centuries past esteemed it a mere adjunct to his hours of self-indulgence. Humour is the light that never fails: the more we seek it the more we see.

"Miss Platt, can you tell me how I can be funny?" I am always being asked this ques-

tion: I wish the questioner could see how funny it is! We are all funny: the world teems with humour; it is only a question of seeing it, seizing it, and putting it into one's work.

Perhaps the most telling humour of all is unconscious humour, and I never yet met anyone so devoid of humour that he could not see the ridiculous side of his friends. Well, what more do you want? Put it in your play. You walk along the street; you see something that makes you smile: put it in your play. Someone you know makes a particularly outrageous statement sublimely funny in its unconscious assumption that the world was built for the convenience of the speaker. Put it in your play. Your charwoman beseeches you to come and look at the "ulster" on her foot: put it in your play. Your friend comes to tell you that his wife has run away from him and adds, "I had the bath repainted only last week!" Anything and everything that happens to yourself or to your friends will make a play, if viewed from the right outlook, but that outlook must be one that includes humour. The humour must be *in the* point of view, and, if it is, it is sure to be effective on the stage because it will be magnetic. Don't be afraid to blend it even

with your most dramatic moments. Work up to the pitch of intensity; round off with one short, quick whip-lash of humour, and your curtain will come down on a sure thing.

CHAPTER VIII

SITUATIONS, CURTAINS, ATMOSPHERE, AND DETAIL

Life is built up of situations, and it is always a marvel to me that authors should find it so difficult to "invent" plots. I cannot see the occasion to "invent" anything: life is always planking situations down on our unfortunate heads. Is there any life so empty of event as to be devoid of situations? Impossible! Every life must, at least, contain two—birth and death—and most lives have one love episode if not more. Then there is the great adventure of leaving the parent nest and going out into the world—that comes to the majority of us nowadays.

I think the inability to see situation on situation in one's own life is really due to lack of memory: we forget how poignant everything has been at the moment when we look down the years and see the looming trifles drop into nothingness. Even if after life brings nothing very big to us, there have always been big events in every childhood, events which at least to the child seemed big; and if we set memory to work

upon what we then experienced and endured, and transfer those throbbing emotions to a grown-up setting, we have got material for our play. Children feel very poignantly because they have not learnt poise, as we older people know. Their feeling is out of proportion to the event. But it is feeling, sincere, intense; and if we look back to our own childhood we can always there find material for the emotional side of our play to which it should be easy to fit a situation. My own life has been a very stormy one, with ups and downs more than the common share; yet, as I look back, I sometimes think the most awful moment of my life was when as a child I went to a new school and was set a mathematical problem for homework. I handed in my paper with just the answer set down. The mathematical master said to me, "You must show me all that you put down on paper, not merely the answer alone." I replied, "I have," at which he laughed. "You surely don't mean to tell me you worked that in your head?" he said. "Yes," I answered. "Come, come," he replied, "let's have the truth," and for a moment it was to me as if my heart stopped beating. It was the first time in my life that anyone doubted my word.

“Now to my mind, an emotion of that sort is as great as any emotion can be, and in that little instance from my childhood I can see the big situation for a play if the circumstances were altered. It should be easy enough to invent a setting for an emotion: the trouble as a rule with authors is that they cannot get intense feeling on paper. Let them always remember that the value of a situation is purely emotional, whether for laughter or tears; that the actual event is nothing in itself, its virtue for dramatic purposes lying solely in the feeling it arouses. I have known so many young authors invent something really grotesque and say to me, “This has never been done before, it is an entirely new situation,” whereas, to my mind, it is not a situation at all but merely a mechanical artifice. The author has put two lay figures, A and B, into an impossible position and he calls that inventing a plot.

We English people pride ourselves so much upon our self-control that we are apt to shut our eyes to one of the greatest of human forces—deep feeling. We confound emotion with emotionalism, and imagine fondly that our self-control is equal to any strain. We have a horror of letting ourselves go, and for this reason

we spoil many a good play by being afraid of its greatest moments.

There is a French phrase familiar to all who study the history of the stage, the "*scène à faire*." Each plot has its "*scène à faire*," that is the big scene on which depends the whole value of the plot, and which must be the big thing in the play. Given any plot, one would think it would be easy to see at once its possibilities. Not a bit. I have play after play brought to me with the germ of an idea undeveloped; the "*scène à faire*" has been overlooked.

Some authors will justify themselves for this by saying that they don't want to be melodramatic—the good old English shrinking from emotion. Emotion is not melodramatic. Melodrama is simply the unrestrained expression of nervous excitement, but, strictly speaking, it is not emotion at all. Emotion is deep feeling, and deep feeling is only possible to deep natures. The more powerful the character, the more powerful the emotion of which it is capable: deep feeling, in the true sense of the word, is a Force.

I have said that one can provide oneself with a situation merely by casting one's memory

back along the years: every life provides material which, with certain alterations, will build-up into the big situation of a play. But this situation will not seem big unless it is rightly handled, and to understand the full value of a situation one must divine the inner nature of the characters who are to be concerned in it. We come back again to what we have said before—that the success of a play depends on its ensemble. The germ of the situation must be in the character drawing which must, in its turn, influence the whole progress of the play.

This progress, however, must be guided by the conditions of stage writing, and while we continue to divide our plays into acts, with an interval between, it is dangerous to break away from the old convention of having each act end on a dramatic note. If there is to be a break in the performance one must make that break at what seems a suitable moment, and for that moment to seem suitable it must leave an impression of completeness, even though it is only complete in the sense that it has awakened just the right amount of expectant interest. While acts finish on an interval it is obviously the first duty of the act to bring the audience into the right frame of mind to wait through the interval with their interest unabated, so that the

curtain may rise again with their mental attitude as favourable to the play as it was when it descended. Otherwise the author is simply raising up for himself obstacles which he will find it difficult, if not impossible, to overcome. It is hard enough to keep the attention of an audience under any circumstances. An author can never afford to relax his vigilance. If he is going to put them out of tune with him and his play he will have to start each act with a deliberate fight to force them back to attention, which is merely an inartistic waste of time and trouble.

The art of writing an act with due consideration for the coming interval may be described as that of accomplishing the seeming paradox of writing something the whole aim of which is to carry interest over to the next act, but yet shall have a certain completeness in itself. So strongly did I feel the need for this that in 1916 I was urging my students to write plays in which each act should be *complete* in itself, being an episode in the life of some central character who was to go right through the play. In short, I wanted plays written something on the lines of the short story serial, and I suggested also episodes in the life of some historical personage—a form of play with which

the success of "Pasteur" and "Abraham Lincoln" has now made us all familiar. I have always strongly felt the need for a certain completeness before an interval, and I believe that the present growing impatience at the break is partly due to the fact that dramatists have disregarded this, and, by finishing their acts tamely, have let down the tension of their plays so much that they have failed to magnetise their audience into a desire to hear more.

The perfect curtain must contain in itself a knack of awakening an unsatisfied curiosity, such as that so ably displayed by Frank Stockton in his handling of that admirable impertinence "The Lady or the Tiger," and, in order that this curiosity shall get a real hold of the audience and remain unabated till the curtain rises again, the minds of the audience must be seized by and brought in tune with the atmosphere of the play.

Atmosphere is a very subtle thing, enveloping as a spider's web and as easily broken. Every detail of the play builds up its atmosphere, and as much care should go to the adjustment of these details as to the conception of the main idea. One so often sees little forgetfulnesses on the stage which set the audience talking. I remember a play with a beautiful,

dreamy theme, the atmosphere in the love scene of which was harshly rent by a titter that went round the audience. This titter was due to the fact that, while the heroine was shivering and complaining of the cold, the hero threw up the window and besought her to look at the stars. "Why don't the blasted fool shut that blasted window? The poor girl's cold!" said a commentator in the gallery, and though the rest of us had been too polite to word it, the same thought was in our minds: we exchanged ideas! Directly an audience begins to talk the atmosphere is broken and the whole illusion has to be built up again.

For this reason it is essential that every detail in a play should be made clear even to the comprehension of the dullest. One never knows what accident will disturb the attention of some members of the audience at a critical moment. People will come late, others will talk—even a fit of violent coughing will distract one's attention and leave one momentarily at sea. It is more than risky to expect an audience to find out particulars of the characters from reading their programmes. Some of them will not do this at all; others will have forgotten what they have read by the time the play begins. Every detail in a play must be made clear, and impor-

tant things should be said not once but several times, and if of the first importance it is even as well that they should be said in the same form of words. A recurring sentence touches the chord of memory and helps very greatly to fix a thing in the mind, especially in a case where an essential point is referred to at the beginning of the play and mentioned again in a later act. Memory is a subtle thing and will wake to life at a trifle if that trifle is judiciously chosen. When the details of a play are adjusted with care all need for lengthy explanations disappears: a thing once said can always be recalled, or an impression once made revived if the key is turned which awakens the train of thought. The choosing of these keys is vital: they really take the place of the "Leit Motif" in modern opera.

Though I have said above that it is well to repeat an important piece of information, and even to repeat it in the same words, I want to take this opportunity to warn all young authors against the repetition of a scene or an idea. It is surprising how many plays have similar scenes in different acts. That is a fatal mistake, as is the repetition of any situation or bit of business—except, of course, in the case of a play which is depending for its point on

such a repetition. It is one of the interesting things about writing for the stage that any fault may become a virtue if handled deliberately and in the right way. This, of course, is really a truism of any art; witness Gainsborough's "Blue Boy" in painting; but what can be done by a master who can produce just the effect he desires, and knows to the full exactly what he is doing, cannot be done by the novice with any impunity.

I cannot lay too much stress upon the necessity for the nice adjustment of detail; a little extra thought given to this subject is so amply repaid. The choice of scene; the circumstances which will give the female characters a chance of wearing effective frocks; the inventing of some little bit of business to help the entrances and exits of the principal characters so that they may have a chance of focusing attention when they enter, and of speaking telling lines just as they leave the stage. These things are so important. An exit line should be so written that it can be spoken at the door so as to avoid the necessity of the actor crossing the stage in silence to go out. The architectural lay of the house in which the action is taking place; the number of servants *likely* to be employed in such a house; the probability of

certain conversations taking place in such an environment—these things are too often ill-considered. I have seen scenes on the stage where the architecture of the house has been impossible unless all the rooms on the first floor were built in the old English style, overhanging the street, and interviews of the most secret character continually take place in halls with galleries, so that all that is said would be at the mercy of anyone passing.

The unsuitability of clothes is very often the fault of the actress and the management rather than that of the author. I remember one drama, the big scene in which was a trial for murder. The life of the heroine is saved at the last moment by important evidence brought by a poor girl who has tramped through mud and mire for two whole days to get to the court in time. She turned up in an immaculate white frock!

Details must not be made too difficult or they will defeat their ends and simply set the audience talking. If any detail is so striking that it forces itself on the attention it will do an incalculable amount of harm, because it will distract the interest from more important things. As I have said before, the stage appeals first and foremost to the eye: what the eye sees is

always more important than what the ear hears. Therefore no dialogue, however essential, will be listened to with concentration if the eyes of the audience are fixed on some detail of the stage setting which is exciting them to comment. For this reason any such devices as those dear to the hearts of stage reformers, such as a fender and fire-irons down by the footlights to suggest the fourth wall of the room, or any curious lighting which throws weird shadows over the faces of the performers, giving us a fantastic shadow-pattern in place of facial expression should be most certainly avoided. Even the inventing of original costumes of weird design may provoke controversy which will advertise the show but must distract attention from the play. All these things, to my mind, represent a misuse of detail; an attempt to violate Euclid and common-sense by inflating the part to an importance greater than the whole.

I am no enemy of beautiful productions. On the contrary, I think that one of the greatest charms of the stage is that it allows so many arts to co-operate; but I would have the setting, however beautiful, in keeping with the play; I would not attempt to force the play into an arbitrary environment. Present Shakespeare

as beautifully as you please and keep him historically correct; but do not twist and distort his simple human nature into a self-conscious, freakish pose. The sick fancies of our decadent times should not be allowed to warp the healthiest genius who ever graced our land.

Keep your detail in atmosphere with your whole play; so used, it will help the spell and hypnotise your audience. But if trifles assume swollen proportions, so that the play is to the detail a mere adjunct, you will simply irritate the more intelligent of your audience and bewilder the more honest. Who is going to listen to the play when the members of the audience are whispering:

“Oh, look at his eyebrows!”

“What has she got on her head?”

“What is this, cubist or futurist, my dear?”

“Well, *I* think . . .”

etc., etc., etc.

Everything that excites the audience to talk about the play during the intervals makes for good, but anything that excites the audience to talk about the production during the play is simply disturbing.

CHAPTER IX

PRACTICABILITY AND EXPENSE

No play will sell unless it is practicable! Not long ago I read the description of a scene which took place in the room of a house built on top of a mountain. The windows at the back of the stage were described as giving a view of the path down this mountain, and people coming to the house were supposed to be seen coming up this path before they entered the room through the windows. Now how the author thought this was to be managed I cannot imagine. All the characters would have had to come from under the stage, and their ascent could not, under any circumstances, have been visible to the audience in front! Evidently the writer of this play had no real mental vision of his stage picture.

It is absolutely essential that an author should see his scene before him, not as an ideal scene, but as a scene taking place on a stage. The whole action of his play must be played before his eyes by imaginary actors or he cannot make it fit stage conditions. A novelist has

no such trouble; he can see beautiful places and ideal rooms as they really are; but a dramatic author must visualise the action of his play in rooms with the fourth wall represented by the footlights, or in exteriors pictured by a backcloth and wings; and to get the points of his play practicable he should know something of the technique of acting and a great deal about the technique of producing a play. He must be able to measure the difficulties of the task he is setting before his actors and producer, or he can neither invent a method to overcome those difficulties nor write a play that will take the utmost advantage of the actors' and producer's art. It will help him immensely if he is clear as to the main lines on which he wants his play produced, and yet can keep an open mind with regard to any suggestions the producer's genius may make. He must bear in mind always that, however great his own talent for writing plays, the actors and producer of that play will have talent of their own, and that it is the ensemble of these talents working for the good of the whole production which will lead to success in the end.

It is well worth an author's while to go to the theatre merely to study the art of acting: if he watches how actors make their entrances

and exits it will help him to write effective entrances and exits in his play. If he observes the details of the business and, above all, the significant pauses which work up to a big acting effect, he will learn how to give chances for the actor's talent in the writing of his lines. If he studies facial expression and the multitudinous inflections of the speaking voice, he will learn how to write the type of line which is going to tell when spoken on the stage. He cannot write for the stage unless he knows something about acting: if he tries to do so he will continually forget that actors are human beings and can only give their best work when their temperaments are treated with consideration.

There is a certain type of part, dear to the inexperienced dramatic author, which actors dub an "ungrateful" part. Whatever the actor may do with a part of this type he is playing the whole time with the sympathies of the audience against him, and he knows that, however subtle his work, it will receive no recognition. A villain may be effectively written, and an actor may enjoy playing him; but when the villain is of a paltry type; when he is best characterised by that expressive word "cad"; the actor's only chance is to make a character study

of him. If the author helps him to do this, both will be satisfied. But too often an author leaves a part of this type uncharacterised because he does not think it worth while to draw it carefully, and the result is that the actor has to work with the consciousness the whole time that his work is being thrown away. Young authors are apt to ask too much of their actors. They seem to think that it is the whole duty of the actor to repair their own mistakes! The only sure method of acquiring practicability where writing for the stage is concerned is to study the art of the actor with due respect for its great possibilities.

Why create a vehicle for acting which gives no scope for it? Play after play is written with the sole purpose of letting off verbal fireworks. This sort of thing can be done equally well in print. When writing for the stage it seems to me an impertinent waste of a great chance to give the actors nothing to do: one might as well write for an orchestra and neglect to study the capabilities of the various instruments.

If authors would manage to get some personal experience of the physical fatigue entailed by acting, I think their eyes would be a little opened to the fact that unless they con-

sider their actors they will kill the chances of their own play by exhausting the principal members of their cast. There are so many ways in which excessive fatigue, even in a highly dramatic scene, may be avoided. It is a grave mistake to strike the top note continuously from beginning to end; one must have rest and pause. A constantly reiterated shriek will drive the listener mad; yet young dramatists will write a scene screwed to the highest pitch of emotion from beginning to end; a scene that could only be played by actors strung up to the last pitch of nervous energy, giving out their utmost in every sentence until the monotony of anguish would become as exhausting to the audience as to the players themselves.

Any monotony is deadly! It requires a great deal of insight and experience to write a big dramatic scene in such a way that it shall give every chance for pause and variety. Pass from one emotion to another if you will, but with due regard to respite. Never give us a monotony of emotion, however dramatic in itself that emotion may be.

It is not always the longest part that is the most effective, and it is never effective to have a principal character on the stage doing and saying nothing of importance while others talk.

I have known young authors open their eyes when I have told them that their principal character was not one likely to appeal to an actor. "Why not?" they say. "We have kept him on the stage through almost the whole of every act." Quite so; but he has been placed in a subordinate position, and an actor would infinitely rather be off the stage than on it ineffectively. The length of a part does not necessarily increase its value.

Even such obvious points as a chance to change a dress must be considered by the author. A play came into my hands only the other day; quite interesting and rather novel in idea, but it depended for its effect upon the fact that the flash of a change of lines showed the principal characters to us without an instant's delay in entirely fresh costumes and make-up. Any "quick-change," as we call it, on the stage has to be carefully timed at rehearsals, and often extra lines written in to lengthen the little scene during which the actress is changing "off." Details of this sort must be practicable or the play cannot be done.

Of course the question of expense is a very vital one. We reckon roughly on £5000 for a West-end production, which does not mean that the production will cost £5000, but that £5000

would be necessary to meet the production expenses and leave enough in hand to keep the play going until a sufficient time has passed for gossip and advertisement to bring regular audiences to the theatre and ensure a run. I am speaking now, of course, of an average comedy. A costume play or a musical comedy would probably cost more. Yet it is obvious that managers cannot be expected to risk £5000 time after time on plays that do not seem to them to have much chance of commercial success.

They will measure this chance of success naturally in figures, as any business man would do. They will think, first of all, of the seating capacity of their theatre. When playing "to capacity" the utmost they can take per week is such and such a sum, and it is very unlikely that any play will play to capacity every night: Saturday nights, of course, not other nights. There is, therefore, a certain reduction to be made from this sum in estimating the week's probable takings. They cannot hope to make money on their venture unless the running weekly expenses of the play, plus the initial expenses of production, can be kept down to a sum which will leave them a good margin of profit on their weekly turnover.

Yet the inexperienced author will express

surprise that the manager of a theatre of small seating capacity will not produce an expensive play. It is obvious to anyone who knows something of theatrical figures that it is impossible for a manager of a small theatre to accept an expensive play, for even if he played to capacity every night the expenses of the play being so high he could not make a sufficient sum to bring him any satisfactory return for the capital he risks over the production. No manager can hope to make a success of every play he produces: he has always got to leave a margin in his calculations for possible loss. He is lucky—very, very lucky—if one play in every four makes a real hit. The profits from that one play have got to pay the loss on the other three to make it worth his while to continue in management. Never blame a manager for looking at the commercial side of a play: he must do so or go out like a snuffed candle.

The calculation of expense is a matter that varies a little from time to time. Some years ago managers were eagerly accepting plays in which each act was played in the same scene, as this saved a very considerable expense for scenery; but they found by experience that audiences did not like one scene throughout a play. I remember, myself, hearing two girls

in the stalls, on looking at their programme, exclaim, "Oh! it's the same scene throughout! Oh! how dull! There will be nothing to look at." Lately, in spite of the excessive expense of scenery in these days, there has been a tendency among managers to prefer a change of scene. If more than one scene is required in each act (and modern plays are showing more and more a tendency to free themselves from all the old conventions) it is absolutely necessary that these scenes should be of a kind which can be changed by the stage carpenters without delay. Nothing is more trying to an audience than to have to sit still while the scenery is being shifted.

A "full set," as we call it (one which occupies and requires the whole depth of the stage) can be set before the act commences behind other shallower scenes, the backcloths for one or more of which can be set in front of the full set so that a change of scene can easily be worked with a very little shifting of the front wings and accessories. The author should alternate what we call a front scene (a shallow scene set in front of a full set) with the more elaborate scenes set the full depth of the stage, and, for this reason, front scenes are often called "carpenters'" scenes because they are

set in front of a full set for the convenience of the carpenters, who can then get through their work of scene-shifting without delaying the play. You cannot have two full sets following one another without a considerable interval of time between them for the carpenters to "strike" and reset. A stage carpenter is a very important person: he can make or mar a play. His work is too little recognised by the theatre-loving public: they do not realise that the smooth progress of a play depends very much upon his untiring care. It is he who sees that every door on the stage opens easily—and what a big thing this apparently unimportant trifle is! It is he, as a rule, who helps the illusion by the skilful preparation of the "props." It is he who sees that not a second is wasted on the mechanism of the stage, and that the actors have nothing to worry about except the playing of their own parts. Oh! the head carpenter's little oil-can, his footrule and screw driver, and, above all, his steady, practical headpiece! Without the help of the stage carpenter the greatest play ever written might become to an audience a mere laughing-stock!

What I have said of scenes applies equally to the dressing of a play. Keep your expenses within bounds, but give the audience a chance

of seeing something that will please their eye. A play that gives no opportunity at all for pretty frocks will have a hard fight to public favour. Not even in so small a detail as this dare we forget the axiom that, where the stage is concerned, the first appeal is to the eye!

Keep your expenses down by keeping your cast down; but remember that the expense of a cast does not depend only on the number of characters but on the type of actors that will be needed to fill the parts. A play with a cast of eleven may be cheaper to produce than a play with a cast of seven, if four out of those seven are parts that require actors commanding star salaries.

In thinking of your cast, think of practicability in every way. If you must have one or two small speaking parts, or, as we call them, "line" parts, try to write them in such a way that they could in an emergency be cut out, as they can then be filled by the understudy and omitted if the understudy were called upon to take the place of the principal. Another good rule is to have one effective character part which is not too long and which is never on the stage at the falling of the curtain: this can then be played by the stage manager. Remember that there will be a stage manager and an assistant stage

manager, both commanding fair salaries, and that it lessens the expense of a production if these men can also be employed as actors. Both must not, however, be on the stage at any curtain, because if they are there will be no one to direct the lowering of the "blind." All these points are very important when it comes to touring, as it is always both troublesome and expensive to tour a number of people.

There is an old saying to the effect that one should never introduce fresh characters in the last act of a play. The reason for this is not only that it is supposed to be difficult to work up the interest of an audience in a fresh character so near the end; it is also an expense reason. If the part is of any importance it will have to be played by an experienced actor, since it is a vital mistake to run any risk of letting down the end of one's play and sending the audience away with a sense of anti-climax. However short the scene in which this new character appears, it must be played in a way to ensure a success—which means it must be played by an actor who will command a certain salary. A manager is, therefore, likely to feel it a pity that he is asked to pay a good salary for a part of which so little use is made.

The position in which any scene stands in re-

lation to the act in which it appears will make a considerable difference to the necessity of having that scene well played, and on this necessity depends the scale of salary that will have to be paid to the actor playing the scene. When writing a play it is well for an author to have some notion of salaries, and to be able to assess in his mind the running expenses of his play should it get on. The more practical knowledge of this sort he possesses the more will he be able to see the manager's point of view, and the more likely will he be to write a play which will please managers and be accepted.

CHAPTER X

HOW TO SELL A PLAY WHEN FINISHED, WITH HINTS ON TERMS AND AGREEMENTS

It is useless to send a play to a manager who does not want one. It is useless to send the wrong type of play to a manager. It is useless to send a manager a play which is too like one he has already produced.

Some of my readers may think it is useless for me to make the three previous remarks. My experience is that no sooner does a management produce a successful play than the posts come laden with new plays which bear an astonishing similarity to the running success. Now, I am not accusing anyone of plagiarism. Ideas are in the air, and the number of plays that get written round a similar idea is astonishing. Many of the plays that reach a manager after a success have been written before that success; but why authors should think that because a manager has produced one play which has proved a winner he is going to spend his life producing others which are like milk and water imitations of that play I do not know:

he will be much more likely to want a play on a theme which would seem to the patrons of his theatre an entire novelty.

Equally numerous are the plays of a wrong type sent up to a management for its consideration. No tongue, however silvery, will persuade an actor-manager to put on a play in which he appears at a disadvantage—why should he? He is going to stake on the production not only a great deal of money, but something much more important than money—his time, trouble, and professional reputation. Why ask him to cut his own throat, and accuse him of being no artist when he declines?

Nowadays, when so many theatres are controlled by syndicates, managements are no longer tied to a certain type of star part, and authors are allowed a wider choice in the writing of their plays. Nevertheless, it is useless to send up a heavy drama to the management of a very small theatre; worse than useless to send up a light comedy to the management of a big spectacular house. A play that depends entirely on the naturalness of its dialogue will stand no chance of success in a theatre which is so large that the actors on the stage have to think of effect in all they say and do if they wish their acting to get over the footlights.

Such plays are only fit for a small house or, as we call it, an "intimate" theatre.

It is equally useless to put a play which depends for its effect upon the management of crowds, on to a stage so small that a group of seven would need careful staging to prevent their getting in each other's way. To do this is to take the leap from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Some theatres acquire a reputation for a certain type of play, and the author who tries to change this reputation by putting on at that theatre a play of an entirely different kind to that which its patrons are expecting may, in the end, make a success, but he has got to start with the odds against him. Therefore, before sending a play up to a management, consideration should be given to the type of play that management is in the habit of producing and the kind of theatre under its control.

Above all, it is well to find out whether the manager really wants a play before sending one in, because if he does not, he will merely glance at it and return it, and, should you send it again later at a more propitious moment his half recollection of having seen it before will stand seriously in its way. It is very dull to have to reread a play, and managers, besides, have a

natural prejudice against one that they suspect of having gone the rounds unaccepted. The first question a manager asks about a play is, "Where has it been sent?" and if he hears that it has already been refused more than once he will hesitate about reading it.

For this reason it is always as well to be sure that your manuscript which, as I have said before, should be professionally typed, has fresh, clean covers. Covers get torn and soiled when a play has been sent through the post several times, and little trouble and expense is involved in taking these off and putting on fresh ones before again sending out the manuscript. If it looks attractive, the manager is the more likely to read it, and if he does, you need have no further fear of prejudice. He will judge it on its merits.

The class of people writing plays divide themselves very sharply into two categories—the author who with a little advice and experience may very well become "worth while," and the author who never is and never can be "worth while." My opinion is that everyone can learn to write marketable stuff and make money by writing except those people who cannot learn to write at all. One can pick these out in a moment, and it is kinder to tell them

the truth; but no matter how hopeless the first attempts of the others may be they will achieve success in time if they are only willing to improve.

A showy first manuscript is not always a sign of ultimate success. Many a timid beginner has won in the end through sheer perseverance. The faculty of observation can be cultivated, and it is practically the only faculty that counts. My test of an author is always the capacity for improvement. I have no use for the type who comes to me with a first attempt and declares that he will not have one word of it altered. The art of alteration is an art in itself and demands very great qualities—insight, open mind, and adaptability. It is perhaps the greatest factor in our power of self-development.

This brings me to a point of view which I hold very seriously—namely, that success in this world depends very largely on personal character. Of course, the word “success” itself needs defining: I am using it here entirely in the sense of a success of which one may justly feel proud; and I am firmly convinced that success of this kind depends quite as much upon personality as upon initial talent.

We are not all equally gifted: we may not

all develop the same degree of wit and brain, but we can all develop ourselves, and, to my mind, the author who wishes to succeed must first of all take himself in hand and learn to see with a sympathetic eye and wait with a sympathetic understanding. If he is bright and charming; interested in others rather than himself; all these qualities will make for good in his work, which will give out his own personal magnetism.

Such attributes as these will not only help him to write his play but will help him to sell it, since they will attract towards him the interest of people in a position to aid him, and, above all, the interest of the manager himself. I shall never forget how a certain well-known manager said to me as he gave me a play to read: "If it's good, Agnes, of course, I must consider it; but don't ask me to read it unless it's a sure money-maker, as the author is such a nuisance!" Certain authors waste such a lot of one's time that they make it impossible for one to proceed with one's work. One knows that to put on a play by a man with that temperament is simply to court a serious nervous breakdown.

Whatever you do, don't make yourself a nuisance. Too many people believe that you

can only get your own way in this world by worrying others, and that the more you badger a manager about your plays the more likely you are to get him to read those plays. Bear in mind always the fact that although you may successfully badger the weak you can never successfully badger the strong, and that unless a manager is a man of strong personality he is not likely to be a successful manager, and, therefore, not likely to be of any use to you.

Of course, all we people who have to do with the stage are extremely courteous: we have at least the outward habit of the well-bred, and it is, therefore, sometimes very hard for the outsider to divine our real thoughts. But liking goes with liking all the world over, and those who consider us will, in the end, receive substantial consideration from us. If we like an author personally we are more inclined to like his work, and I am strongly of opinion that the most practical advice I can give any author is *to be liked*. Get personally known if you can: where the stage is concerned our pleasant social intercourse means a great deal to us. Become one of us and you will learn the technique of your work with the more rapidity, and consequently that work will become more valuable. You will exchange ideas with the prac-

tical actor and understand a little better why so many of us shiver when we hear the good old phrase, "Art for Art's sake." It is not, as the outside public are quick to imagine, because we misesteem art; on the contrary, we generally hold her too sacred to want to talk about her: she is our religion, and the more earnest among us show a certain shrinking from dragging into words our inner thoughts. We take her for granted.

But when the outsider talks about "art for art's sake" he, through a lack of knowledge of the practical side of the stage, is only too apt to refer to a state of things which means starvation for the working actor. Put on a beautiful play which has no money in it by all means, but don't expect the men and women who have their living to make, and often families to keep, to spend their whole time playing without a living wage. I so often hear the uninitiated rave over the good work done by the promoters of artistic schemes. Before I give my personal tribute to any such scheme I want to see the salary list. One can only run plays that don't pay if one chooses casts composed of the moneyed amateur!

Get to know something of the actor's world and you will not only improve the technique of

your writing, but you will also learn how to write a play which will sell.

If a manager considers your play seriously he will probably apply to you to make certain alterations. Everyone judges a play from its own point of view, and you are likely to have very different suggestions made by different people—in fact, so diverse that they may often seem to contradict one another. The manager knows the type of play he wants to produce, and he will bring your play into line with this type as far as he can before finally deciding to produce it. He will then offer you a contract.

Many authors go to an agent for advice about contracts, and it is certainly as well that one should know something about the matter before accepting blindly any terms that are offered. There are managers and managers, and although one is perfectly safe when dealing with the cream of the profession one does not always succeed in selling one's first play to the right person. An inexperienced author cannot expect such good terms as an author of reputation, because his name is not an advertisement and will not, in itself, bring money into the house. Then his play will probably need a greater expenditure of time and trouble on the

part of the producer before its good points can be presented at their full value. An experienced author has learned how to make his points: in inexperienced work the possibilities may be there, but the actual shaping may need a considerable amount of adjustment.

The average theatrical contract gives a manager a licence to perform a play either for a definite term of years or for an indefinite period, provided that the manager gives not less than a certain number of performances per year. The author takes a percentage on the gross weekly receipts, and this percentage is in the form of a sliding scale. For instance, say it starts at 5 per cent on the first six hundred, becoming $7\frac{1}{2}$ per cent on the gross receipts exceeding six hundred and are not more than eight hundred; 10 per cent on all exceeding eight hundred but not exceeding one thousand, and so on; these would be very good terms for a West-End production. The terms for the provinces are usually different, and American, colonial, and foreign rights should all have separate consideration. Film and amateur rights should be excluded. An option is usually paid on account of royalties and a time limit set on this option. If the manager does not produce the play within that time limit the author re-

tains the money paid for the option and the rights of the play revert to him unless a further option is taken up. Managers, as a rule, want the American rights with the British rights, but they should be asked to pay a separate option for them. Usually the touring rights, though the percentage may be different, are included in the option paid for the West-End production: suburban theatres count as provinces.

There should always be a clause in every agreement to the effect that no alteration may be made without the author's consent. I always wish one could add to this clause the words we often find in a lease, "Such consent not to be unreasonably withheld!" The author should certainly give his consent to every practical alteration, since it is obvious that the producer should know his business and is not very likely to take the trouble to think out alterations to a play unless he thinks it for the good of the production.

Far more plays are bought than are ever produced. I have known a play make quite a number of hundreds from option money and finally go into the waste-paper basket! I have known other plays which have been bought and bought and bought again for ten or twelve years and yet, in the end, have had a most successful

production. Plays written round a purely topical subject are of no use unless produced at the moment, and if written by inexperienced authors have a somewhat small chance of sale. Plays written with a too temperamental leading part are only saleable for the actor or actress that part happens to suit.

A few years ago it was difficult to sell a play that had not a big star part; nowadays this difficulty is getting less, and with the coming in of trade union rules for actors will probably decrease still more, and plays with an all-round cast, easier to write and usually dearer to the heart of the author, will come into their own.

At the same time it must never be forgotten that the length of a theatrical performance is limited, and in the brief two hours allotted to a play it is difficult to keep your audience interested in many people. When a play is built round a central figure, two hours is sufficient to allow the audience to get thoroughly familiar with his personality, and to feel at the end of the time that they have taken him to their hearts. If they feel this they will come again and again to see him, and the author's percentages will consequently rise in value. There are exceptions to every rule, but I should be

inclined to say myself that, though a play with an all-round cast may satisfy the artistic susceptibilities of the few, the play with the really lovable central figure is the play that is going to fascinate us all.

CHAPTER XI

CASTING AND PRODUCTION

It is well for an author, when he has written a play, to make some notes upon what he would consider an ideal cast for it. As adviser, I am often asked by managers to suggest the ideal cast for a play. Of course, we know that it is usually impossible to get the ideal cast, because only a very great stroke of luck would leave all the actors most desired free to accept an engagement just at the time when the play was to be produced; but if one has in one's mind's eye the actors who would be ideal for the various parts it greatly simplifies the choosing of substitutes. We know, at any rate, the types to look for.

The casting of a play is all-important, and the author should be very careful in making any suggestions on this matter, because, unless he is experienced, his suggestions might do more harm than good. In choosing a cast, as in everything else, ensemble is vital. I shall never forget my own feelings when I was asked to take up the work of completing the cast of

a play which someone else had begun. It was a drama, intense and grim, each line being as the voice of doom. My predecessor had engaged an actor of 6 ft. 4 in. to play with an actress barely 5 ft. Luckily actors themselves are so intelligently alive to the danger of appearing at a disadvantage that I had no trouble in inducing both of them to see how impossible it was for them to appear together in such a play.

Actors, as a rule, are extremely intelligent about their work, and are very quick to see any point that is fairly put before them. If an author wants his cast to get the best result out of his play it behoves him to use his instinct for character to guide him in his treatment of each member of his cast. If he will only remember that actors are human beings with their good and their bad side; that it is as important to them for his play to be a success as it is to himself; that their reputations are quite as much at stake as is the author's; and that they are not only willing, but anxious, to co-operate with him in every way for the good of the show! If, in short, he will handle them with tact and sympathy, he will find them devoted to the cause. In this, as in everything else, personality tells; and if the personality of the author

is sympathetic towards his cast he will find his cast zealous to a degree.

I come of an old theatrical family, and all my life I have lived in stage circles, yet I shall never overcome my feeling of amazement at the patience, good-humour, and goodwill of the working actor. Beasts of burden: they have been this too long; expected to give every moment of their lives for an uncertain wage. Trade union rules are righting this great wrong at last. It is high time. But, even if the economic conditions of the actor's life are likely now to be on a better footing, his profession still remains, and must ever remain, an arduous one. His work is, of its nature, work that plays havoc with the nerves. So is the work of a dramatic author.

If each would respect the other's anxieties all would be well; but trouble arises too often because a young author, to whom his first night is a unique even, forgetting that a first night is equally important to his cast, is inclined to vent his own nervous irritability upon them. The age-long feud between authors and actors is simply due to the fact that the author's nervous anxiety too often renders him unjust to the actor, who, being all nerves himself, is sometimes only too ready to take offence.

I am not saying for one moment that an actor is always the best judge of what is the best for the play; but I do say that he knows the technique of his own art, and that the technique of the author's art must take account of this. I do not say that an author should place his interests blindly in the hands of the producer, but I do say that he should take the point of view that the producer is trying to do his best for the whole production, and thus it is obviously to the advantage of the production that it shall be guided by one clear point of view. Let the author discuss this point of view with the producer before rehearsals start as much as he pleases, but once rehearsals have started let him leave it to the producer to get his result in his own way, standing by to help sympathetically not aggressively.

Let the author remember always that nothing is more baffling to a company than to receive instructions at war with one another. He must never, on any account, go behind the producer's back by telling the company that he wants such and such effects other than those the producer has set down. If he has any suggestion to make, let him make it to the producer quietly and leave it to the producer to put it before the company. Let him do and say nothing to

lessen the producer's authority: in every way let him be as loyal to the producer as he expects the producer to be to him. In the same way, if he wishes the cast to put intelligent work into his play let him respect their intelligence. I have known an author speak contemptuously of an actor who had seen the character he was to play from a different point of view to that which the author intended. The author regarded the actor as a fool for making the mistake. It never seemed to occur to him that, for such a misreading to be possible, there might have been some lack of clearness in his own writing.

Where the stage is concerned, listen to everybody! As Hermann Vezin used to say, "Stricture, even from fools, sometimes does good," and since it is the task of the dramatic author to write so that he shall be understood of the many, the opinion of the many must be important to him. Take the point of view that if anyone misunderstands your meaning the fault lies in the way that you have expressed your meaning; thus you will have always with you a spur to improvement.

Inexperienced authors are often annoyed because the wording of their lines is changed at rehearsal. I have in a previous chapter pointed

out that this may be rendered necessary by some acoustic consideration; but very often an idea for some witty or telling line will occur to the producer or to someone else at rehearsal. In this case the author gets the benefit of the good line. So many interests are at stake over every production that the good of the production must be the one determining factor, and even the author's modesty, however praiseworthy in itself, must yield to this prior claim.

But lines come to be changed in another way which is more worrying to the author. A turn of words, which seems quite natural to him, will stick in some actor's throat and he will object to it. In these circumstances, even if the objection seems foolish, it is often well for the author to give way, because if an actor is asked to speak a sentence which does not seem to him natural he will stiffen up over it and it will not seem natural as he says it. As I have said before, we all have our characteristic turns of speech, and to some of us the use of words which are a little archaic is a matter of daily custom, whereas to others it is bewildering. Where acting is concerned a certain allowance must always be made for the human equation: it is courting disaster to insist on an actor doing what he does not "feel."

The temperament of the actor playing the part at the original production will sometimes cast a special light upon a character which will take the colour of his personality: that is one reason why the casting of a play is of such vital moment. Of course, one always hopes to get the right people for the parts; but if one is forced to accept a substitute who is not quite in tune with the author's original intention it is sometimes better for the author to reshape his intention to suit his interpreter than to run the serious risk of having the part played by a man who is out of harmony with it, and who is, therefore, unable to get the best out of it.

An actor, to play a part well, must, to use our expressive phrase, "get into the skin" of that part. He must think with the thoughts of the man he is portraying, move and look as that man moved and looked. He must become that man, and he cannot do this unless he instinctively is that man for the time being. If an actor cannot "see" his part; if it does not seem to him consistent, and if its phraseology does not appear to him the right phraseology—in short, if he is not convinced himself, he can never make of that part a portrait that will convince others. If, then, an author finds that an actor cannot see a part as he sees it, and

he is bound to have that actor in the cast, he, as the more adaptable of the two, the man with the broader view, will do well to fit his part to the actor, so that at any rate the result may be homogeneous and played by the actor with conviction. The author's meaning reaches the audience through the actors as interpreters, and will never reach them rightly unless the interpreters rightly understand. My advice, therefore, to all inexperienced dramatists is, "Use every means of tact and persuasion to get your interpreters to understand what you have written, but if you find that this is absolutely impossible, then give them something that they can understand."

The reason for my insistence on this point is that young dramatists very often have to put up with somewhat of a scratch performance of their plays. A bad performance is very much worse than none at all, since if the play fails it is done with for good and all. Therefore I want to lay stress upon the fact that it is well for them to take every means they can to get as good a result as possible, lest in straining at a gnat they find that they have to swallow a camel! The producer knows his cast: he knows the material on which he will have to depend to get his results, and he is usually the best

judge in any disputed point of how far it is wise for the author to give way. If you desire an harmonious production, do your best to set an example of loyalty to the producer, who has the responsibility of the show upon his shoulders.

There is yet another determining factor in the ultimate shaping of a play, and that is the audience. Their verdict is final. No matter how clever a line may seem to the author, or even to the cast, if it fails to "go" with the audience it is better cut out. First nights often bring many surprises! The point the success of which we felt most sure is the point which proves to have no value, and the obvious easy effect at which we were rather inclined to turn up our noses is the effect that scores. No matter how carefully a play has been prepared, it will nearly always be subject to slight alterations determined by the verdict of the first night audience.

A play will sometimes undergo variations on its progress through the provinces, though these variations are usually more due to the instinct of the actors than to any actual work on the part of the author. Some towns furnish audiences with most delicate, critical susceptibilities; at others they can see nothing unless

it is thrown at them. If a play is to tour successfully in all parts of the kingdom certain changes in its interpretation are sure to creep in, and at these it is useless for an author to cavil.

Although I have laid considerable stress on the fact that an author must trust the experienced judgment of those into whose hands the task of rehearsing his play shall fall, yet I would be the last to suggest that authors should be incapable of defending themselves from the shortsighted suggestions of certain managers who, from a cheese-paring economy or an innate inability to appreciate anything but the coarsest type of stage effect, would spoil the whole intention of a play by seeing it only from a sordid point of view. Authors cannot study the stage too carefully. They should go continually to the theatre, not only in the West-End but in the provinces and suburbs, and keep a list of all actors who seem to be promising, so that they may be ready with suggestions for casting their plays either for London or tour whenever needed. A manager is glad to have an author's suggestions if those suggestions are intelligent and helpful: it saves him time and trouble, and anything that makes for the good

of the production makes for the good of his pocket.

The antagonism that sometimes seems to exist between authors and managers is due to the fact that some authors, merely through inexperience, start by being unreasonable—that is, impracticable—in their demands, and that the manager, being a busy man, does not give the time to go into the whys and wherefores of the matter, but somewhat arbitrarily goes his own way without explanation. If authors would only learn something about the matter beforehand this sort of trouble would not arise. A manager is a man who makes his living by producing plays; he has usually a very keen eye for all that affects his own interests, and, obviously, would not hold the position he does unless he had the knack of successful management. One of the secrets of success in this line is to be always ready to welcome a good idea, and managers who know the monetary value of a good idea *do* welcome it with open arms. If then the author knows enough of the practical side of production to be ready with good ideas, he will find the manager not only willing to listen to him but eager for his suggestions. It is the author who thinks he knows and doesn't

who is such a *bête noire* to both manager and actor.

Don't grumble that managers show a want of consideration for authors when producing their plays. Master the subject not only of writing, but of casting and production; learn to estimate results as a producer estimates them and you will be able to speak with the voice of authority, while your work will gain enormously in value. The man of knowledge is the man we want.

CHAPTER XII

STAGE TERMS

In writing this book I have purposely used as many of our stage phrases as I could, for they are so expressive. The very nature of their work teaches actors the value of words, and the slang of the stage has a beauty of its own which no one with any sense of language can fail to appreciate. It is one of the peculiarities of the stage that no one can pretend an intimate acquaintance with its ways with impunity—"Their speech bewrayeth them!" A friend of mine once told me that she had been asked to put money into a theatrical venture run by a woman who stated that she had had some seven years' experience with various well-known managements. I undertook to see this woman for my friend, and asked her what she had done. She replied that she had acted in most of the famous plays of that period. I said, "Are you a quick study?" "Oh! yes," was the answer, "I have no trouble at all in learning my words." Now stage folk never speak of "acting" a part, we always say

“played” instead, and although nowadays the newcomer does refer to his “words,” in those times we all kept to the old stage custom of referring to our “lines.” I was able, therefore, without the slightest hesitation to tell my friend that this woman was an impostor, and a little further inquiry proved that I was right.

This habit of never saying we have “acted” a part but always that we have “played” it seems to me to make vivid the fact that the really great actor does play with his part; he is so easy in it that it seems all spontaneous and natural; but the poor actor acts every minute of his time. One of our terms of greatest contempt is to say of an actor, “Oh! he is always acting,” and I think one of our most charming customs is that of associating ourselves with our parts. When telling a story of any play in which we have appeared we always speak of the characters in that play not by their names but by the names of the men and women who have played with us, and our own part invariably becomes “me.” I remember once when I was with Hermann Vezin at a crowded assembly, he was telling me the story of some great drama in which he had made one of his big successes. There was a sudden lull in the noise of conversation round us, and in

the silence his great voice tranquilly announced, "And then I murdered my wife!" To identify oneself with one's work is surely the big thing.

There are many people, unfortunately, for whom the stage has an ugly fascination: they want to be thought of the stage, not because they admire it, but because they think it has the attraction of something a little "on the edge." These people pick up certain slang phrases and interlard their conversation with them, but they nearly always trip up over some little form of words, not distinctive enough to put in a glossary, and yet significant at once of real familiarity with our folk. Such a phrase as "Why don't you write in?" or "Have you got a shop?"

There are certain phrases, much in use at rehearsals, which can hardly be included in a glossary. For instance, a producer will say, "Don't be so precious," meaning don't speak your words with too much regard for each one. "We don't want acting in farcical comedy," another producer will cry, meaning that if you pause to elaborate every effect you will lose the one thing vital—pace.

No detail must be dwelt upon to an extent that will distract attention from the main theme. This axiom is just as important in producing

as it is in writing plays. Art is all a matter of selection, and an artistic result is never achieved without the sacrifice of some little personal vanity. The author will have to eliminate many a line good in itself—perhaps even a part that he has drawn with care—because he will find that line and part stand out too clearly and so rivet attention at the wrong moment, focusing it upon some subordinate matter and throwing out the balance of the whole. In the same way an actor will have to give up some effective bit of business or submit to having good lines cut out of his part because, when the whole play is in rehearsal, that part is seen to be thrown into a prominence that is going to take sympathy from the central figures. I am afraid I must regretfully admit that, in some cases, the taking of good lines from one part and giving them to another is due to an inferior motive. *Vanitas vanitatum!* We are all human, but this is not by any means so often the case as the public suppose. An inexperienced author will often give a very good line to a very small part, and the actor engaged for that part, himself inexperienced, cannot speak the line to bring out its value. It is, therefore, better for the line to be transferred, if possible, to an actor who can speak it. In spite of those

exceptions which prove all rules, the good of the show is the one thought that rules in stage-land.

I am often amused at the opinion that prevails about us even now though the old ban is removed and the old ostracism has given place to the more dangerous extreme of "lion-hunting." It has taken us all we know to fight up against the enervating effect of the petting and spoiling we receive in certain quarters, yet even now our friends, when speaking of us, will say, "'Oh! he is an awfully nice chap. Not a bit like an actor.'" And they call us by our Christian names, whether they know us or not. Now when we call one another by our Christian names we do it from a sense of comradeship; because the old ostracism has bound us together, and, however we may squabble between ourselves, we are all *one folk*.

It is an odd world this stage world of ours; a fascinating, twopenny-halfpenny world; so like this book of mine, half rhetoric, half slang; but at the back of it all, unspoken, taken for granted, there is a simple code of honour—"The public first, and self—nowhere!"

GLOSSARY

SCENARIO. May be called the skeleton of a play. It is a rough draft of the various scenes and how they follow one another; the entrances and exits of the characters and the progress of the action; all told as briefly as possible.

SCENE. This word is used in two senses. It either refers (*a*) to the setting in which the play is supposed to be happening, or (*b*) it refers to the dialogue between two or more characters who are on the stage. It begins at the moment when these particular characters are left by themselves, and it ceases directly any other character joins them. Each of these points is the beginning of a fresh scene.

SCENE PLOT. This phrase indicates the diagram of the scene, giving the exits and entrances, the position of the door, fire-place, window, arrangement of furniture, or other particulars.

CUES. This word is used to indicate the last few words of the line of dialogue which precedes either the entrance of a character, a speech of another character, or some action taking place upon the stage, or some effect worked by the property man, or limelight man, or electrician, off the stage.

BITE YOUR CUES. This means the starting of your own speech sharply on the finish of the preceding speech.

STAGE DIRECTIONS. In writing stage directions the first letter only of certain words is employed to indicate these words. For instance, R. L. C. are contractions of "Right," "Left," "Centre," and refer to the right, left, or centre of the stage. As a rule in England these are taken to mean the right or left of the actor upon the stage as he faces the audience. Abroad, exactly the opposite is the rule, and right or left indicates the right or left as seen from the auditorium. Of late years we have had plays written from either of these points of view, and it is always advisable to indicate at the commencement of the play which method is being employed.

We meet these three letters in conjunction with other letters which modify them. Thus R. U. E. means right upper entrance, or R. I. E. right first entrance. P., prompt, that is the side on which the prompter stands. O. P., opposite prompt, the opposite side of the stage. Up Stage means up to the back of the stage, as far as possible from the footlights; Down Stage means down to the footlights. In the old days when the stage was set with wings they were numbered 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. Hence the direction R. I. E. means the entrance down right, by the footlights, or, in the old stage parlance, down by the first wing. In the same way up C. or down C. means up towards the centre of the backcloth or down towards the centre of the footlights.

BACKCLOTH. Refers, of course, to the scenery at the back of the stage. In a room scene the back wall

of the room would be set a little lower on the stage, while up back is usually a cloth giving a view from the window or of a room beyond the doors up C. when they are opened. This cloth is called "backing."

BOX SCENE. Is a room complete with a back and two sides joining on to one another. Wings nowadays are very little used except for open-air scenes, woods, and so on.

SET. A set is a fairly elaborate scene.

FRONT CLOTH. A front cloth is a scene painted on a cloth hung well down stage, usually in front of a more elaborate setting which the stage carpenters are busy preparing during the progress of the scene that is being played in the front cloth. For this reason such scenes are known as "carpenters' scenes" because they have been introduced into plays to enable carpenters to continue their work at the back of the stage during the playing of the front scene without putting the audience through the tedium of having to wait unentertained while the set is prepared. Such scenes are frequently used in melodramas, or in dramas of a picturesque description, but are seldom employed in comedy, where one scene per act is the usual desideratum.

CAST. The word "cast" is simply a nominal use of the verb. All those who are cast for the parts are termed the "Cast." It is often incorrectly spelt with a final "e."

STAR. The word "Star" is used of an actor of

celebrity. The Star Part is the part written for such an actor.

LEAD. The leading part in any play is referred to as the "lead." The lead may be either a male or a female character, but one has to be careful not to use the word "lead" except of the one part, whichever it may be, which is really the principal part in the play. If, for instance, the man's part in the play is distinctly bigger than the principal woman's part, the play is said to have a male lead, and the woman's part is simply known as that of the leading lady. It is a breach of etiquette to refer to a part which is merely that of a leading lady as that of the "lead."

HEAVY LEAD. The Heavy Lead is distinct from the Juvenile Lead in that it represents an older, more serious, and dramatic type of part.

JUVENILE LEAD. Juvenile Lead is a term never used if the juvenile part is really the great part in the play; but when the leading part in the play is that of an older man or woman, then the best young part is known as the Juvenile Lead.

OLD MAN OR OLD WOMAN. These terms are applied indifferently to any part representing a man or woman of fifty years or upwards. Should, however, the part be a leading part, the phrase character part is more usually employed.

A LOW COMEDY part is one of very broad farcical effects.

A LIGHT COMEDY part is one which implies liveliness verging often into what we call a "patter" part

—a part with a great deal to say, which must be spoken quickly and trippingly. Pace is essential in these parts.

AN ECCENTRIC COMEDIAN is one who blends character of a whimsical type with his light comedy.

THE CHAMBERMAID is practically equivalent to a French grisette. The phrase Singing Chambermaid has now practically dropped out. It implies a light comedy part of a piquante type with a song or songs.

BUSINESS, written Bus., is the word used to indicate any particular bit of action, such as the humorous effect that a comedian will get out of punching sofa pillows, playing with the various objects on a table, twisting his fingers in a funny way and so on. It may also refer to action of a far more important type which directly concerns the progress of the play, such as the secreting of a letter in a certain ornament or piece of furniture by one of the characters and the subsequent upturning of all the furniture in the room in search of it, which formed the climax of Act I of "Lucky Jim."

A GAG AND A WHEEZE are rather difficult to differentiate, as they are somewhat loosely used; but it seems more usual to call any set phrase employed by a comedian continually during a play a "wheeze" and to keep the word "gag" for those lines, often very witty, which are spontaneously introduced by certain comedians when on the stage, and which often vary from night to night. For instance, the well-known conjuror Bertram had a habit of saying "Isn't it

wonderful?" after all his tricks. This was a "Wheeze." Those two comedians, both so great in their way, and both, unfortunately, lost to us—Dan Leno and James Welch—had a knack of introducing extremely witty lines on the spur of the moment. These lines were "Gags."

DRESS THE STAGE. To Dress the Stage is to place the actors who are not absolutely the principals in the scene in such a position on the stage that the whole appearance of the scene shall be effective.

TAKE THE STAGE. To Take the Stage is to cross down front. This type of business is used in emotional scenes.

To COVER is to get in front of another actor—a very bad fault on the stage.

To FLUFF is to forget one's lines.

To DRY UP is to forget one's lines and stop completely.

PLOT. This is a word used by actors during rehearsal to indicate those lines in the dialogue which tell facts essential to the plot. It is an old stage rule that while lines of this sort are being spoken the actors should remain as still as possible, as movement at such a moment might distract the attention of the audience from the words.

LENGTH. This word has almost gone out of use. It was continually employed in the old days of the poetic drama. Parts were said to consist of so many lengths, each length being forty-two lines.

CLOSE. We sometimes say of dialogue that it is not

close enough, or that a certain portion of it requires writing more closely. By this we mean that too many words have been used. Verbose dialogue is, to us, like a sieve from which the sense runs out.

TO GET OVER means to get over the footlights. We say of a point in a play that it does or it does not "get over," meaning that it proves effective or the reverse with an audience. Many a good bit of acting, delicate and subtle, will be appreciated by the cast at rehearsal, but will prove at the actual performance of the play to have "no value" because it is not sufficiently effective to carry to a distance.

A CURTAIN is the end of an act just before the falling of the curtain.

THE BLIND is the curtain itself.

THE ENTRANCE is not only the coming on to the stage of any character, but the way he comes on; the few lines of preparation which lead up to it, and the whole situation, so to speak, which builds-up for the entrance of the character: above all, how he comes on and what he comes on to do.

THE EXIT LINE is the line which all skilled dramatists are careful to write for an actor to speak effectively just at the exit before leaving the stage.

GALLERY LINES are not, as most people think, nowadays, lines which only appeal to the less cultured of an audience. They are lines which, by their nature, can be spoken with emphasis and which will carry to a distance.

PROPS. A contraction of properties, and refers to

all the little articles required for the action of a play—writing-paper, letters, teacups, salver, card, bag, etc., varying, of course, with each production. Props. is also used to indicate the man whose business it is to look after these things and see that they are ready at each performance.

BOX OFFICE PLAYS. We say that the final judge of a play is always the Box Office, by which, of course, we mean the number of tickets sold. A Box Office play is a play that makes money.

THE END

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